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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!

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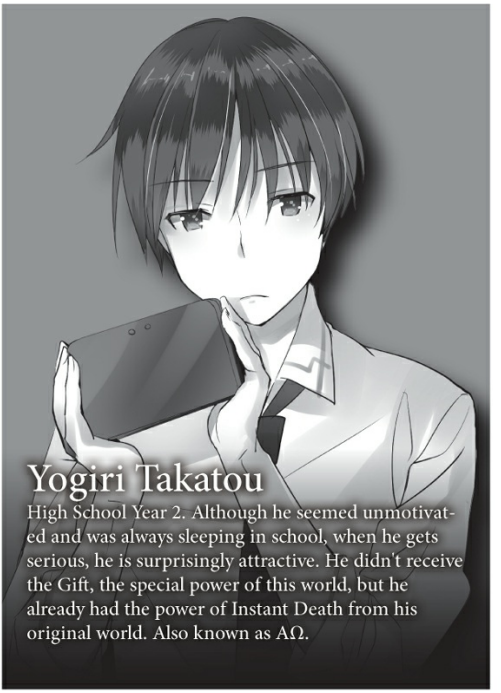
CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

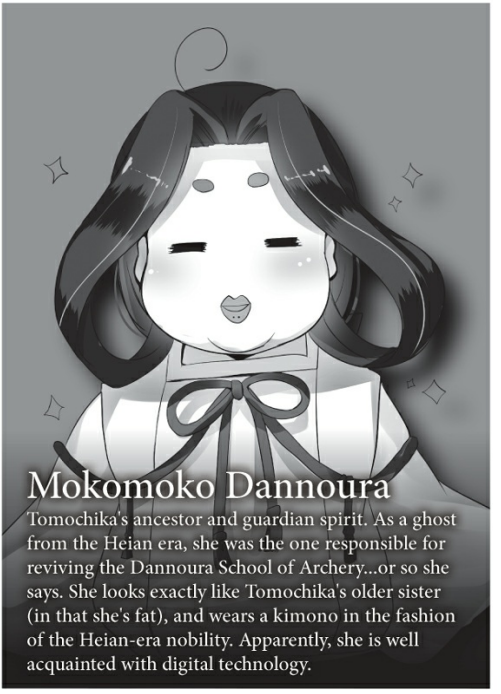


Yogiri Takatou

High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.

Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.

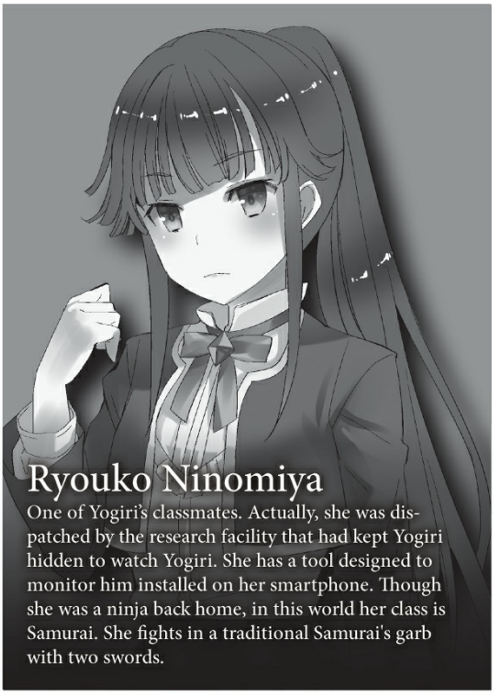


Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery...or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

Carol S. Lane

One of Yogiri's classmates. An American who joined their class as she entered high school. Like Ryouko, she was tasked with monitoring Yogiri, but she works for the Agency. Her class in this world is Ninja, and she wears a red ninja outfit and forehead protector when fighting. Her weapon is a ninja sword.

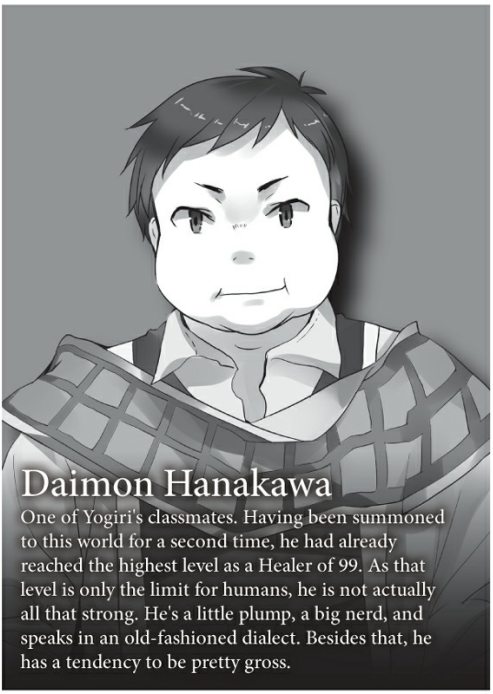


Ryouko Ninomiya

One of Yogiri's classmates. Actually, she was dispatched by the research facility that had kept Yogiri hidden to watch Yogiri. She has a tool designed to monitor him installed on her smartphone. Though she was a ninja back home, in this world her class is Samurai. She fights in a traditional Samurai's garb with two swords.

Risley

The Sage Lain, being the highest level of vampire known as an Origin Blood, challenged Yogiri in hopes he would be able to put an end to her immortality. As she wished, she died, and left behind this girl, a replica of herself modified to be her ideal. She only has a small part of Lain's memories.



Daimon Hanakawa

One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level as a Healer of 99. As that level is only the limit for humans, he is not actually all that strong. He's a little plump, a big nerd, and speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Besides that, he has a tendency to be pretty gross.

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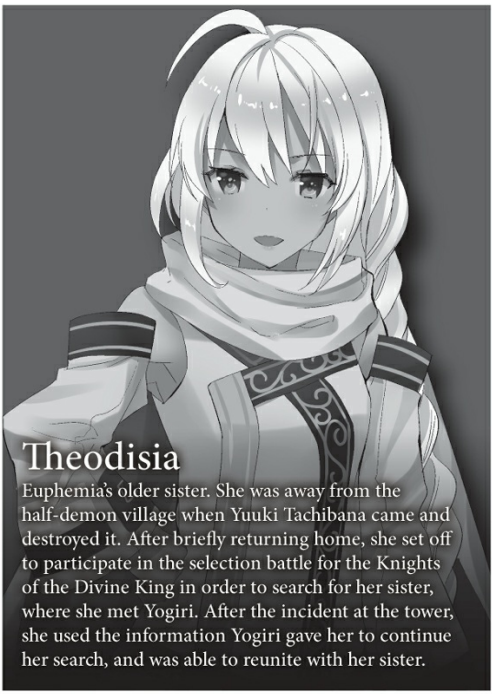
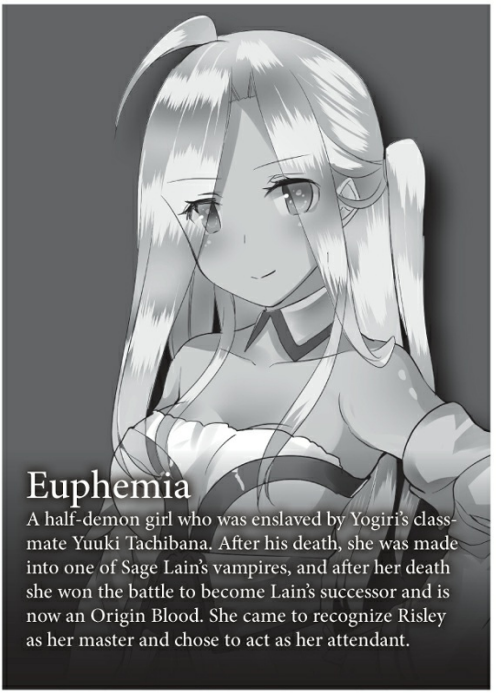
CHARACTERS



Theodisia

Euphemia's older sister. She was away from the half-demon village when Yuuki Tachibana came and destroyed it. After briefly returning home, she set off to participate in the selection battle for the Knights of the Divine King in order to search for her sister, where she met Yogiri. After the incident at the tower, she used the information Yogiri gave her to continue her search, and was able to reunite with her sister.



Euphemia

A half-demon girl who was enslaved by Yogiri's classmate Yuuki Tachibana. After his death, she was made into one of Sage Lain's vampires, and after her death she won the battle to become Lain's successor and is now an Origin Blood. She came to recognize Risley as her master and chose to act as her attendant.

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ACT 1

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Chapter 1 — I Am Perfectly Happy with the Simplistic Village Girl-Type!

"And so, it looks like I've become a slave again," the slightly plump young man, Daimon Hanakawa, muttered to no one in particular.

The way he muttered made others think he was a bit creepy, but ever since returning to this world, he had been talking to himself an awful lot. He couldn't bear what was happening to him without complaining to someone, even himself.

"Hey, piggy, what are you mumbling about? It's annoying." The voice came from behind and made him jump. He had been talking quietly enough that he didn't think anyone would hear him.

They were in a forest heading for the Demon Lord's castle. It was a place he had visited back when he'd first been summoned to this world. Specifically, they were in a region to the south of the Kingdom of Iman, the heart of the territory claimed by the Demon Lord. The forest was said to be the last difficult obstacle before the monster's castle, but that was a story from long ago. The Demon Lord and the leaders under him had all been defeated, and the creatures that had made up its army had long since dispersed. Unfortunately, that didn't mean the forest was safe. Even without monsters, ferocious wild animals still inhabited the region.

At the moment, Hanakawa was being used as bait. He was being forced to walk at the front of the group so that, as they put it, "any attacking animals would go for him first." Of course, such a strategy was pointless in this environment. The whole thing was little more than petty bullying.

"M-My apologies." Hanakawa turned around. Behind him were three boys and a girl, making a party of five including himself.

"You know, I don't like the way you talk all fancy like that." One of the young Japanese guys stepped up to him. "Are you trying to make fun of us?" His name was Akinobu Marufuji. Like Hanakawa, he had been transported to this world during their school trip.

“N-No, not at all, I was just—huh?” His first thought was to apologize. He had intended to pass things off frivolously like he always did. He wouldn’t even mind begging on his hands and knees if that’s what it took. But he soon realized that was naive of him.

Akinobu had thrust his sword forward and, without a moment’s hesitation, planted it firmly in Hanakawa’s ample gut. Hanakawa crumpled to the ground with a cry, curling up around the intense pain in his stomach as Akinobu sneered down at him.

“Are you sure he’s okay?” another young man asked, staring at the bizarre sight with obvious shock. His name was Ragna, and he was a local born and raised in the area. He was also the leader of the party.

“It’s fine; we’re just playing around,” Shigehito Mitadera said, immediately trying to smooth things over with their worried companion. “Come on, Hanakawa, hurry up and heal yourself. Ragna’s getting worried. You’re making it look like we did something bad. Read the atmosphere, would you?” He was, like Akinobu, one of Hanakawa’s fellow classmates.

“I’m...fine. Everything’s good.” Hanakawa laughed and forced himself to speak without his usual affectation. He knew that if he continued to talk in his preferred style, things would get much worse for him.

Healing the wound in his stomach, he stood back up. While he could heal such an injury in an instant, it didn’t make it hurt any less in the meantime.

“Hey, why don’t you give it a try, Ragna? It’s like proof of our friendship,” the girl, Rei Kushima, said as she slid up beside him. She was yet another student summoned from Japan, another member of his former class. This trio had split off from the others the moment their group had reached the first city en route to the capital, so they had avoided the catastrophe of the battle royale.

“But...” Ragna frowned. The idea of pointless violence must have struck him as being wrong.

Th-That’s correct! You must not heed the words of these brutes! Do you really believe they are good people? You should rebuke them! Perhaps then their treatment of me would improve! But if Hanakawa spoke out of turn, he was sure they would kill him, so all he could do was shout inside his own head.

“Right, I suppose violence is unacceptable,” Rei replied.

“Yes, even among friends, it’s a bit much,” Ragna said.

“Still, saying only that ‘violence is wrong’ is a one-sided way of looking at it.”

“What do you mean?”

“This guy loves it when you punch him and stab him and stuff. See, look how greedily he’s watching us.”

I’m looking at you in no such way! This is hate *in my expression!*

“Maybe you don’t see it much living out in the country, but there are lots of people like him in the city.”

“I see. The city really is something else. I don’t know anything about it.”

This isn’t an urban-versus-rural issue, you know!

“Well then, you should take this chance to learn all you can,” Rei suggested with a chuckle. “If you want to get along with him, you should hurt him!”

“I see...” Ragna nodded deeply, as if in admiration.

Don’t just say “I see”! My tastes are all in watching! I certainly don’t enjoy suffering myself! If I have to suffer at all, I want it to be when a beautiful girl is looking down at me in disgust as she steps on me!

Hanakawa desperately wanted to run away, but the dangerous looks from Rei and the others clearly told him he was to stay put and take whatever was given to him.

As Ragna approached, he could do nothing but fake a smile. And then the man’s fist struck him right in the stomach. Once again, he crumpled to the ground with a cry of pain.

“I thought I punched him really lightly,” Ragna said, looking unsure of himself as he watched Hanakawa squirm.

“Yeah, it looks like it hurt a lot, doesn’t it? He must be in a lot of pain.”

“Then I shouldn’t have hit him, right?”

“But he *enjoys* the pain. I’m sure he thinks much better of you now. You two must be an awful lot closer.”

“Oh, really? I guess there are all sorts of people...”

Oh, come on! Why would you believe something like that! Hanakawa used his healing magic, but this time, it didn’t do all that much. There were some kinds of damage that he just couldn’t heal from as easily. *Ugh... If I knew things were going to end up this way, I never would have gone off on my own.*

He was beginning to regret running away from Yogiri.

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Flying over the city, which was covered in the Dark God's flesh, and crossing over the walls, Hanakawa and the others had managed to escape safely.

"That looks...terrible. Or I suppose I should be glad it's only this bad?"

"I assume only those closest to the city walls were able to escape."

"Well, all praise goes to Takatou, I guess. If he hadn't stopped that wave of meat from growing, getting past the walls wouldn't have saved anyone."

David, Ryouko, and Carol left the glider behind and were looking at the refugees fleeing the city. Hanakawa had used the chance to slip away. It was just a reflex by now. He figured if he was going to run, it was best to do so while Yogiri wasn't around. But he had also hesitated. Was fleeing the right choice? It might have been safer to stick with them.

That thought had slowed him down, leading him to hide behind a nearby rock. "N-No, this is the right choice. If I stay with them, they might consider me part of their group."

Hanakawa's objective here was very different from the others'. Yogiri and Tomochika wanted to return to Japan while he wanted to enjoy himself in this world to the fullest.

"But I could still make use of them until the last moment..."

Being with Yogiri was inarguably the safest option. But in another sense, Yogiri was also the greatest danger. Hanakawa was well known for his ability to make people angry with him, so it wasn't unthinkable that Yogiri might turn his powers on him at some point.

As he was thinking things over, Yogiri and Tomochika descended from the sky.

"Wait, Tomochika has wings now?! She looks like an angel!" His classmate was wearing her skintight black battle suit. Large wings had appeared on her back, carrying the pair through the air towards them, with Yogiri clinging to her around the waist. "Wait, why couldn't *I* have done that?!" Looking on enviously, he watched as the two landed safely.

"So, not everyone in the capital was killed," Yogiri observed, glancing back at the city.

"Wait, where's Hanakawa?" After having decided to head to a city nearby, Tomochika had suddenly realized that he wasn't with them.

“Good question,” Yogiri replied.

“Hm. Well, that’s to be expected. I am a Healer, after all. And the fact that I’m level ninety-nine means there is considerable value in having me... Wait, they aren’t going to look for me?!”

The most they had spared him was a brief glance around, but after that, Yogiri quickly lost interest. “I guess he ran. There’s no reason to take him with us, though, so it doesn’t matter.”

“It didn’t seem like he was interested in going back home anyway.” Even Tomochika seemed satisfied with his absence.

“No, no, no! I mean, sure, you’re right, but if you were to insist that I go with you, I wouldn’t hesitate!”

Whining from his hiding spot was pointless. As he muttered to himself, a cute girl jumped out of a passing carriage. She accosted Yogiri, and two more beautiful young women stepped out behind her.

“Wh-What is going on?! He’s just surrounding himself with all kinds of women now? Come on!”

All but surrounded by females, Yogiri was the lone boy in a group of seven. Technically, David was there as well, but he could safely be ignored, so as far as Hanakawa was concerned, it was a perfect harem.

“W-Well, it’s not like I’m jealous! I want more pure, blindly trusting girls who will be embarrassed but still let me do whatever erotic stuff I want to them! There’s nothing for me to be envious of here at all!”

Afraid the jealousy might drive him mad, he had turned and left. No one noticed him go, and no one tried to follow him.

“N-Now then, let us regroup. They were nothing more than acquaintances of happenstance. Totally unrelated to my shyly joyful new world life. Now that I have finally attained freedom, where should I go?”

He had once again considered what he could do to achieve the otherworld lifestyle he was looking for. His first course of action would be to leave the area. The damage caused by the Dark God was immense, so it wouldn’t be a simple thing for the city to recover from. As such, another country was the best option, but the neighboring nations would likely be in a state of chaos as well. It wasn’t hard to imagine the flood of refugees they would soon be facing.

“And the country I was summoned to last time would be no good...”

During his first journey to this world, he had been summoned by the magi

of the Kingdom of Iman. They had brought over several heroes to bring down a Demon Lord. As part of that group, Hanakawa had assisted in defeating the threat but had promptly been sent back to his own world once the task was complete. In short, Iman had no interest in rewarding him for his past efforts, nor were they likely to welcome him back. He had been treated like an annoyance rather than a hero, so if he casually waltzed back in, it would undoubtedly lead to nothing good.

"Thinking back on it now, their behavior was rather insulting. Perhaps I should add them to my Revenge List."

He couldn't do anything at the moment, but it was always possible that he might obtain more power in the future. So, in anticipation of that time, he added the Kingdom of Iman to the growing list in his mind.

"I wonder how the territory of the Demon Lord looks now that the monster is gone?"

He recalled the end of his previous adventure. The people who ruled the Demonic Kingdom were monsters who called themselves "demons," but the majority of the locals were ordinary people who were being oppressed by them. If the Demon Lord and his subordinates had been defeated, the country might have acquired some measure of peace.

"And the people of the villages there were simple and kind. They even seemed to have customs similar to night crawling!" Although Hanakawa had never experienced it himself, he had heard plenty of stories about others in the army that had been organized to defeat the Demon Lord getting lucky. "Hm. I'm also a little familiar with the area. Perhaps that's not a bad idea after all."

At any rate, remaining there wouldn't have been ideal. He'd felt that if he stayed in the area and ended up coming across Yogiri again, things wouldn't go so well for him.

"And if he and Tomochika are looking for Sages, it would be best to find a place that Sages are unlikely to visit."

He had never heard of Sages visiting Iman. There was likely a Sage responsible for the area around it, but they didn't seem liable to show their face unless it was absolutely necessary.

"The next issue, then, is how to get there... Well, as long as I have money, it should be manageable." While Yogiri had robbed him of most of his valuables, he still had a number of generic magical items left, which would

probably fetch a good price. “And I am perfectly happy with the simplistic village girl-type, too!”

With images of his future harem in his head, Hanakawa had immediately set off for the former Demonic Kingdom.

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Using carriages and trains, Hanakawa had made it close to the Kingdom of Iman easily enough. Though he doubted many there would remember him, he’d decided to pass Iman by and head directly for the Demonic Kingdom just in case. There was essentially no border, so he had no difficulty making it inside.

“Hm. I suppose that would be Mount Caluone. As such, the Demon Lord’s castle would be in that direction.”

Mount Caluone’s tip had been blown off in the past, so it worked well as a landmark. His late classmate Higashida had refined his ability to cast the Fire Ball spell at its absolute limit, enabling him to destroy the top of the mountain.

“It appears there are no monsters here after all. A slow village lifestyle should be more than possible!”

He walked down the road leading through the forest. A village, an isolated settlement where they had spent the night on the eve of their attack against the Demon Lord, should have been on the other side.

“It’s one of those, then. The last village before the Demon Lord’s castle! Totally self-sufficient, they have little communication with other villages, are quite hospitable to travelers, and they even have the custom of providing warm bodies to spend the night with—”

Hanakawa stopped as a woman’s scream split the air. “Hmm! I am feeling the premonitions of an event of some sort!” He saw a young woman running down a nearby path. “Pray tell, what is the matter?”

“Th-There’s a boar! You must run away!”

“Heh heh. Please, stay behind me!”

Something as simple as a boar would be no issue for him. Although his class was “Healer,” it wasn’t like he was helpless in combat. He could fire magical bullets from his fingers. They only had the strength of a handgun, but that was more than enough for wild animals.

“A simple boar is no... What?!”

The ground shook beneath him. The boar showed its face, but something was wrong.

“It seems like my sense of distance is a little off...” Hanakawa looked up at the creature whose head was well above him. “Is that really just a boar?!”

He immediately used his Discernment Skill, but there was no sign of the Gift. It appeared to be an ordinary wild animal, though its size alone was a significant threat. Hanakawa’s method would have been akin to attacking it with a peashooter.

“Uhh, what do I do now? Ah, maybe I have an item for this!” He retrieved a staff from his Item Box. Though it was a one-shot expendable tool, it allowed him to use a preset magic spell. “Wind Cutter!”

He waved the staff. A blade of wind shot forth from its head, striking the massive beast dead-on. The blade split the animal cleanly in half from head to rear, passing straight through it.

“Ha! No matter how large, an animal is just an animal! Before the intellect of man—err, before magic, they are as nothing!”

The boar had been cleaved in two. But it didn’t fall over. Normally, one would expect the animal to be dead by now, but the bisected body instead began to stitch itself back together, countless black threads shooting out to connect the two halves, which reconnected with a squelch. Though there were still traces of injury where it had been cut, the boar seemed more or less back to normal.

“What the hell is that?!”

“You have to destroy the heart.”

The voice came from the direction of the monstrous creature. A young man shining with a golden aura had stuck his hand into the beast’s abdomen. As he pulled his hand back out and watched the animal collapse to the ground, the girl that Hanakawa had been protecting ran to the newcomer with a cry.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit too dangerous to be walking around the forest alone, Yuu?” he scolded her.

“But mother said we needed more mushrooms.”

“You should have just told me. Ah, thank you for helping my sister.”

“Oh, well, uhh...did I really help much at all?”

“Yeah. At the rate it was going, I wouldn’t have made it in time. Are you

from the city? The boars around here are quite ferocious, so I can imagine your surprise."

"Ah, ferocious..." He laughed awkwardly. "Yeah, I'm not sure that quite covers it..."

Something still felt wrong. While the monsters did indeed seem to be gone from the region, if the wild animals were this dangerous, it seemed unlikely that humans could survive here. The last time Hanakawa had been in the village, the locals had only been around level ten at the most. There was no way people at such low levels could handle enemies like this.

Hanakawa used his Discernment Skill on the boy and immediately sputtered in shock. His class was Villager, but his level was fifty thousand.

"Wh-What is going on?! Wouldn't he be strong enough to defeat the Demon Lord on his own at this level?!"

The aura surrounding the boy abruptly disappeared, and his level immediately dropped down to five. "By Demon Lord, you mean the guy with weird clothes living in the castle nearby, right?"

"Hm? Is that how you see him?"

"Actually, you seem familiar. Have you been here before?"

"My name is Daimon Hanakawa. I was once sent here to defeat the Demon Lord."

"Huh? Did he do something bad?"

"I suppose so. He was probably in the wrong; however, I was but an underling, so I am unaware of the details." The perspectives of the Kingdom of Iman and the people of this country seemed to be quite different, but figuring all that out was too much to bother with, so he offered a simple lie instead.

"I see. My name is Ragna. What brings you here, Hanakawa?"

"I was hoping to visit your village, but would that be unwelcome?"

"Not at all! We love visitors!"

And so Hanakawa had safely reached his destination.

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Hanakawa had received a warm reception at the village. He'd enjoyed the singing and dancing, gorged himself on delicious foods, and relaxed in a luxurious bath.

Then night fell. In the room they had set aside for him, he'd waited nervously on the bed.

"No, no, no, this has got to be it! They were so persistent in asking what kinds of girls I like!" Someone would surely be coming to his room. "Ah, I was too indecisive. I couldn't decide, so I just said I'd leave it up to them!"

He had no idea who they would send until she or they actually arrived, which only served to stoke his nerves.

"Well, there were plenty of high-quality options, so anyone is welcome! Actually, if they send some older woman, then... But leaving it up to someone more experienced for my first time doesn't sound too bad... What a decision! Well, I did say I'd leave it up to them, so I guess it's not my decision to make anymore."

Perhaps because of his nerves, he was getting increasingly high-strung, fidgeting and rolling restlessly around on the bed. He wasn't sure how long it went on for, but just as he was beginning to grow impatient, a knock sounded at the door.

"Finally, they have arrived! Here comes my debut as a man!" His chest swelled with anticipation as he grabbed the doorknob.

And it grabbed him back.

"What?"

He was holding hands with the door. Where a doorknob should have been was now a person's hand. As he stared at it dumbly, more hands began to sprout from all over the door, grabbing him.

"Wait! This isn't the kind of foreplay I was looking for!"

The door burst open, throwing him across the room. Hitting the wall, he fell to the floor and looked up, moaning in pain.

"Wh-Why are you here?" He recognized the people standing there. They were his classmates; three who had disappeared the moment they had reached the first city on their travels.

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“Hah! Piggy really is here.” It was the Creator, Akinobu Marufuji.

“I guess he is. But do we actually need him?” The Femme Fatale, Rei Kushima.

“He’s useless as a human, but we need to trigger the flag for being friends with the hero.” The Master Oracle, Shigehito Mitadera.

Oh, these guys are lethal, Hanakawa thought. Reviewing their Gifts with his Discernment Skill, he was quickly overcome by an inescapable feeling of dread.

Chapter 2 — I Feel Like It's a Good Idea to Try a Swimsuit or Hot Spring Episode at Least Once

After escaping from the meat-covered capital, Yogiri was speaking with Risley, who had just exited her carriage.

"I used to be a Sage, I guess. I'll give it to you, so please listen to my request!" As she spoke, she held out a round stone. There was someone she wanted dead. She must have meant for the stone to be a sort of reward.

"No, thanks. I can't just go around killing people because someone asked me to." Still, Yogiri took the stone from her. After all, it was a Philosopher's Stone, one of the things he wanted most at the moment.

"Hey! I don't know about her asking you to kill people, and I'm fine with you turning her down, but you can't just take the stone after that anyway!" Tomochika chided him.

"Oh, okay. Here you go, then." He returned the stone to Risley.

"Oh, uhh, sorry. I got a bit excited after finally meeting you, but I guess you have no idea what this is about."

This girl, who he had never met before, had suddenly appeared and started rambling to him, so it was understandable that he was utterly confused. He turned to the woman who had stepped out of the carriage with her. She was beautiful, with silver hair and dark skin: Theodisia, someone he and Tomochika had worked with at the tower back in the canyon.

"Is this your sister?" They didn't look a bit alike, so he figured she wasn't, but he felt it was best to make sure. Theodisia's sole reason for going to the tower in the first place had been to search for her missing sibling.

"No, she isn't, but..." As she struggled to explain the situation, someone else descended from the carriage. Like Theodisia, she was a woman with silver hair and dark skin. Yogiri recalled that they belonged to a race of people known as half-demons.

“Wait, weren’t you one of Tachibana’s bodyguards?!” Tomochika blurted out. Her recognition of the newcomer reminded Yogiri of their encounter with Yuuki. He’d been one of their classmates who’d had the class of Dominator, and he had forced five women to act as his personal guard. This woman was one of them.

“Yes. I apologize for my behavior back then. My name is Euphemia.”

“So, you’re the sister. If we had remembered earlier, things would have gone much easier for you, huh?” Tomochika said apologetically. “Well, you managed to find her anyway, so I guess it worked out in the end.”

She had remembered hearing the name Euphemia before, but had only been able to give Theodisia the vaguest of details at the time. At least they had eventually found each other.

“Anyway, I’m glad you two finally connected, but I’m still not sure why you’re here,” she continued. Yogiri had the same questions.

“I would be more than happy to explain, but I’m not sure this is the place to do so.” She indicated the carriage. “Would you perhaps be willing to come inside?”

Tomochika turned to Yogiri. “What do you think?”

“They’ve got a Philosopher’s Stone, right? And we can’t just take it from them, apparently.”

“I’m surprised the thought even crossed your mind, stealing from a little girl like that!”

“Then I guess we need to listen to what they have to say. What about you guys?” he asked, turning to their three companions.

Risley’s group only seemed to be interested in Yogiri, so the others were just standing back and waiting to see how things turned out.

“I had intended to take you somewhere a bit more relaxed, but if you have a carriage, you hardly need my guidance,” David said. He was, in the end, a city guard. The survivors from the capital were relying on him for guidance. It occurred to Yogiri that dragging him away from the capital might not have been the best idea.

“I would be happy to go with you,” Ryouko offered.

“Same,” Carol agreed.

Their original roles had been to keep an eye on him. Perhaps they intended to continue that mission even now.

Leaving David behind, they joined the newcomers, deciding to hear them

out in the carriage.

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Soon after, the seven sat within the luxurious vehicle. The inside was arranged like a meeting room, complete with a fancy table and sofas. On one side was the owner, Risley, and her two attendants, Euphemia and Theodisia. On the other side were Tomochika, Yogiri, Carol, and Ryouko.

“Please allow me to explain our circumstances,” Theodisia offered.

She went on to recount the events that had led to their current situation, beginning with Yuuki Tachibana’s attack on the half-demon village in the Haqua Forest. For some reason, Yuuki’s monsters and slaves had attacked the sisters’ village, completely destroying it. Although some of their people had had the strength to defend it, the enemy numbers were just too overwhelming. The survivors were ultimately enslaved by Yuuki and taken away.

And that was just the beginning of Euphemia’s myriad misfortunes. Thanks to her beauty, Yuuki had selected her for his personal guard. She had served him for a while before he was killed by Yogiri, which had freed her.

Leaving Yuuki’s body behind in the ruins they’d been exploring, Euphemia had immediately headed for the surface, where she met the Sage Lain. The surface had been reduced to rubble by an Aggressor known as the Darkness, and Lain was curious about how Euphemia had survived unscathed. She was a vampire who could grow her own lineage by drinking the blood of others. So she drank Euphemia’s blood, enslaving her once again.

Lain then attacked Yogiri and was killed in turn. Euphemia, once again on her own, returned to her now abandoned village. No one other than her had made it back.

Although Euphemia had been freed by the Sage’s death, there was more to it. Lain was a type of vampire known as an Origin Blood, and her death had prompted a succession battle to claim her title. Euphemia had been dragged into that battle against her will and won, inheriting the title herself. With nowhere else to go, she went to a mansion that she had found in Lain’s memories, where she met Risley.

“I’m sleepy,” Yogiri said with a yawn.

“Hey! They’re trying so hard to tell us their story right now!” Tomochika wasn’t impressed with his attitude. Theodisia’s story wasn’t exactly a straightforward one, but she was clearly making an effort to explain it in easy-to-understand terms.

“Well, yeah, the story is long too, but it’s more because I used my power so much. So can you listen to them for me, please?”

With that, he flopped over, resting his head on Tomochika’s lap. He had been using his powers almost nonstop since the nuclear explosion in the Underworld, so his exhaustion was to be expected.

“Wait! I never said you could use me as a pillow!”

“It’s too cramped in here. I have no choice. It’s out of my hands.”

“You have no self-restraint at all, do you?!”

But Yogiri was asleep within moments, so there wasn’t much point in complaining.

It appears to be the boy’s one weakness, Mokomoko observed. *Not that it would be enough to kill him...*

The more Yogiri used his power, the more exhausted he became. But it wasn’t a significant weakness. After all, you could wake him up just by shaking him a bit, and even while asleep, he could counterattack.

“All right, please ignore him,” Tomochika told their hosts. “You can continue with your story. I’ll tell him everything later on.” Sleeping on her lap this way, Yogiri looked incredibly peaceful. While she couldn’t help but feel slightly exasperated by his behavior, the thought that she could provide him even a small amount of peace also made her feel a bit proud.

“I see. In that case...” Theodisia continued her story.

When Euphemia had arrived at Lain’s mansion, she’d found Risley there making preparations for a journey to the capital. Recognizing Risley instinctively as her master, she had decided to join her, and they had gone on to the city together. Along the way, Euphemia had noticed the presence of some of her people, and Risley had decided they should help the half-demons they came across. As they had entered the canyon to do just that, they’d found Theodisia.

“And after meeting each other, you came here. But why *did* you come here? You said you were looking for Takatou?”

“Yes. I suppose I need to explain who I am. Basically, I’m Lain, the Sage.”

“Huh? Really?” Tomochika had only seen Lain from a distance, but she knew the Sage hadn’t been a young girl like this.

“Technically, I’m a copy she left behind before she went to fight Yogiri. As a safeguard against his power, she made me a completely separate life form, so I don’t have any of her memories.”

Yogiri had killed all of Lain’s clones during their encounter, so creating Risley as a unique being who had none of the intentions or memories of the original had been the right choice.

“She also created me to like Yogiri.”

“What?! Why?!”

Oh? It appears you have a new rival.

“I think she did it to make sure that I didn’t end up trying to fight him. You see, she had something she wanted him to do.”

“Kill someone, right?”

“Yes. Someone that Lain could never kill herself.” Risley didn’t seem to feel like saying any more than that. She must have been saving the rest for when Yogiri woke up.

“So what should I ask next? I feel like there’s a lot I still need to know.”

“May I?” Carol raised a hand, breaking her silence.

“What is it?”

“Since we have so many girls here, I feel like we should have a swimsuit or hot spring episode at least once.”

“How does that follow?!” Tomochika snapped.

“A hot spring? Are there any around here?” Risley asked Euphemia, taking Carol’s suggestion literally.

“It’s possible. I could use my senses to look for one, but in either case it would require us to move.”

“You don’t have to take her seriously! And could we wait a bit before we go anywhere?” She had thought of something she wanted to do before they moved on.

Chapter 3 — Is It Normal to Say Weird Stuff Like That in America?!

Tomochika returned to their hotel room near the palace by herself. It was the room they had first secured upon reaching the capital. Being a fairly tall building, it had survived the bulk of the sea of flesh, so she had gone back to get their luggage.

"I wonder if coming here by myself was a mistake."

Her guardian spirit Mokomoko was the only one with her.

It is certainly a little dangerous, but being alone makes getting around much easier. It would have been more challenging to bring the boy along.

Tomochika had been able to navigate the city despite the sea of rotting meat covering it thanks to her battle suit. It allowed her to move at high speeds and jump distances that were otherwise impossible for humans. It could also transform to allow her to stick to walls, and she could even extend it like a rope for a short distance and use it to pull herself up.

Not that I understand why you're here in the first place. Do you really need your luggage that badly?

"We could buy most of this stuff again, but not if we're broke." The idea of trying to get by on what was left in her wallet made her uncomfortable. If they were going to continue their journey, they'd need more money.

Tomochika confirmed the contents of the backpack sitting in the corner of the room. The treasure they had received from Hanakawa was mostly still intact. Explaining how they had acquired such massive wealth seemed like a pain, so they had kept it here to hide it from their classmates.

"And then there's her." She looked at the girl lying on the bed. It was a robot, but you couldn't tell that just by looking at her. She was designed to have the appearance of Yogiri's friend, Enju Sumeragi.

Hm. If we're just bringing a single person back...

"Couldn't I carry her?"

Unnecessary. I may have an idea.

Mokomoko stared intently at Enju's face, deep in thought. Suddenly, one of the android's fingers moved.

"Huh?"

"Good. It seems it is possible," Enju said, sounding exactly like Mokomoko. She then sat up, looking around. "I've successfully hacked Enju's body. I can control her freely now."

"Is there anything you *can't* do? Did you possess her or something?"

Not at all. I'm controlling her remotely. This time, it was Mokomoko herself who spoke.

"Right, because you can send out those electro waves or whatever?"

Her family guardian could send and receive electromagnetic signals, which presumably made it possible to control the robot remotely, but Tomochika had given up on trying to understand how.

"Since I can move using her own power, it should make things a little easier. Did you find everything you were looking for?"

"I did, but...there might still be people up here." The meat hadn't made it up to the top floor of the building, so there was always the possibility that some locals had managed to survive.

"Shall we check?" asked "Enju" as she stood up from the bed. "Of course, even if we find them, we can hardly bring them with us."

"But we can't just leave them here, can we?" Tomochika couldn't hope to save every person left in the capital herself, but if there was someone nearby, she felt like she should at least try to help them. Abandoning them felt a little heartless.

Hm. Allow me to take a look. If you were to simply appear before them, things might get complicated. Sitting Enju down on the bed, the ghost slid through the wall and into the next room. It seemed she couldn't control Enju while she herself was moving.

"Enju, was it?"

Tomochika timidly touched the robot's cheek. The soft and flexible skin didn't feel like anything that could be made in a lab. As hard as it was to believe that such an elaborate android existed, it must have looked exactly like the real girl. She appeared to be a little younger than Tomochika, but her almost artificially good looks were enough to make her jealous.

"I mean, I guess it *is* artificial. Man, that's weird."

"Hey!"

"Whoa!"

Enju had suddenly cried out, taking Tomochika by surprise. And then Mokomoko slid through the wall back into the room.

"Was there any reason to make her yell like that?!"

I just wanted to scare you.

"Now's not the time for pranks! Did you find anyone?"

Yes, well. There were a number of survivors, but I don't think we need to concern ourselves with them. Someone has already arrived to rescue them.

"They've been rescued? Who could save them from this?"

You remember the Divine King we met in the tower, yes? She is here. So there is no need for us to get involved.

"Oh, really?" The Divine King was the one who had been responsible for sealing away the Dark God Albagarma. She held a position above that of the Swordmaster. It seemed reasonable that she'd show up to start helping people, and she would likely be able to do so on her own.

"I should go and say hello."

Don't.

"Why not?"

It's hard to explain. But it seems something is wrong with her. She has a strange aura about her.

Given Mokomoko's unusually somber tone, Tomochika decided to comply.

"The Divine King is below us. Let us escape from the rooftop," the robot suggested.

Following her companion's guidance, Tomochika grabbed her luggage and made her way upstairs. They would escape in the same way they had before, gliding across the city. "Enju" put the luggage on her back and clung to Tomochika.

"It's not that I don't trust you about this battle suit, but this is still a bit terrifying."

With that, Tomochika jumped as hard as she could off the edge of the roof. Wings grew from her back, quickly catching the air. Before long they were gliding smoothly over the capital.

Tomochika glanced back. Between her wings, she could see the hotel behind them. The Divine King was standing there, looking out at her from a window. They had only met briefly at the tower, but even so, the woman's

sublime aura of nobility had been clear at a glance. One could feel unconsciously she was some sort of saint just by looking at her.

But now the sight of her made Tomochika uneasy. This was indeed the Divine King; that was clear even at their current distance. But she also seemed wrong, like something vital was missing from her.

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When Tomochika returned with their belongings, Yogiri was still asleep. The group sitting inside the softly rocking carriage was silent. Although they had heard a summary of Risley's situation, it seemed the real meat of the discussion would have to wait until Yogiri woke up. From Ryouko and Carol's perspective, Risley and her two attendants were total strangers, so there wasn't much for them to talk about.

"So, where is this carriage heading?" It suddenly dawned on Tomochika that she had no idea where they were actually going.

"Well, first of all, we're just getting away from the capital. We're a pretty large group, so we want to avoid any potential conflicts with the refugees," Theodisia explained.

"What do you mean, a large group?" The only ones there were Risley, Euphemia, and Theodisia. Beyond that, she supposed there was at least the person driving the carriage, but that was it.

"I told you we were traveling while searching for our people, right?"

Per the sisters' stories, Yuuki Tachibana had attacked their village of half-demons, taking away the most attractive women for himself. After his death, the remaining half-demons had been lost.

"We actually managed to find a surprising number of them. They're riding in other carriages."

Since their group had become so large, the sisters had gone ahead with Risley to make contact with Yogiri.

"Are there really that many of you?"

"We haven't found many people from our own village, but we found more captured half-demons than expected." Theodisia had a troubled look on her face. She wanted to save the people from her home village, but she couldn't just abandon others of her race, strangers or not. "At present, we have about a hundred people with us, and we expect that number to continue growing."

“A hundred?!”

“Euphemia’s detection abilities are truly incredible. And once we find them, we can hardly walk away.”

Whether or not the half-demons they came across were the ones they were specifically searching for, they couldn’t simply leave them to their fates. However, the more people they gathered, the harder it would be to keep everything under control. At least, that was Theodisia’s concern.

“Lain left behind a lot of money, and I’m pretty rich. So we don’t have any problems with finances, but if we keep growing, it’ll be hard to move around...” Risley also seemed troubled. Half-demons were feared and hated. A hundred or more of them working together would be seen as a threat even if they were doing nothing wrong.

“We’ve been attacked a number of times already. It hasn’t been anything Euphemia and I can’t handle so far, but...” Their race was naturally stronger than humankind but not to an insurmountable degree. If a dedicated group came together to get rid of them, it was quite likely they would succeed.

“Well,” Euphemia said, “now that we have met Sir Takatou, we have achieved Risley’s objective. We’ll have to think about what comes next. Oh, I’ve found one.”

“Found what?”

“A hot spring.”

“Why were you even looking for one?!”

“You wanted to visit one, right?”

“Huh? Uhh, I don’t know. It’s not like I’m *not* interested, I guess...” Tomochika looked out the window. The trees were *moving*. As the carriage pressed forward, the plant life was literally sliding out of the way, forming a path for them.

“What the—?! Where are we going?”

“Hot springs are in the wilderness, right?”

“Wait, wait, wait! This is too ridiculous for words!” A carriage like theirs shouldn’t have been able to move through such a densely wooded area, but they continued to ride on as if the trees weren’t even there.

“Since becoming a vampire, Euphemia can control the trees,” Risley offered.

“Is there anything vampires *can’t* do?!”

They soon made their way out of the woods and entered a valley. A river

flowed through the space between two mountains, creating a small clearing there. Gouts of steam plumed into the air from various points along the banks.

They had found a secret hot spring.

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"So, now we have to compare our bust sizes, right?"

"Is it normal to say weird stuff like that in America?!" Sensing danger from Carol's gaze, Tomochika instinctively covered her chest with her arms.

"What? I see it all the time in anime. The girls are always doing things like that."

It was evening. Tomochika, Carol, and Ryouko were all in the hot spring. There was a collection of springs near the river running between the mountains, so they had decided to set up camp there. As it was far away from any human settlements, it was best for the half-demons as well. The other carriages had rejoined them, and they were now setting up their tents. As the three girls had nothing in particular to do at the moment, they had decided to take a dip.

"But seriously, what's so fun about it?"

"Oh, is that supposed to be the dignity of a girl who's sure she's already won? Or do you just hate Ryouko?"

"Don't drag me into this."

"Hey, Tomochika, do they really float in water?"

"Can't you tell with yours?!"

"Oh, well. Now that I finally have a chance, let's try rubbing them!"

"What do you mean 'finally'?!"

"Seems like you're having fun," Risley commented as she arrived.

"Oh, did you finish setting up already?"

"Not yet, but I don't really have anything to do."

"Right?"

In your case, even if you wanted to help, you wouldn't know how, Mokomoko remarked.

"Well, sorry!" Tomochika replied. She couldn't help but feel guilty about not being very useful to the others. "Anyway, are you sure you should be wasting time here with us?"

“My objective was to meet Yogiri. I’m not in a hurry to do anything else. Maybe Euphemia and the others have some things they need to do, though.”

“You mean about being attacked from time to time?” Ryouko asked curiously. Obviously, sitting around relaxing in a hot spring while their party was being attacked wasn’t something she would allow herself to do.

“Oh, that’s not a problem. Euphemia put up a barrier to keep people away.”

A barrier spell was cast on the surrounding land to prevent one’s presence from being detected from the outside. In this case, it surrounded the entire hot springs area, so no one should have been able to tell that there was anyone there.

“Well, I suppose it’s fine, then,” Tomochika answered. “I thought this place was so open that it would be good for an open-air bath, but I was worried about other people showing up.”

The hot springs dotted the banks of the river that cut through the valley. The material that Tomochika used for her battle suit could have formed an enclosure for them, but she had felt it would ruin the aesthetic and had decided not to use it.

“Anyway, if anyone comes here, it would only be Takatou, right?”

“That would be the biggest problem!” Tomochika looked around nervously just in case, but figured it would be pretty out of character for him to do something like that. While he would certainly enjoy such a situation if it happened by accident, he wasn’t the type to intentionally barge in on a group of women taking a bath.

“I wouldn’t really mind.” Risley sounded disappointed.

“If he was happy to see you naked, I’d have to hit him.” No matter how you looked at it, Risley was about elementary school age. Tomochika wouldn’t put up with such behavior.

“I see. You don’t want him looking at her; you want him looking at you! So, that’s the kind of girl you are!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Rather than being an intentional perv, isn’t he the type to just walk in without thinking about it?”

“No, even Takatou has *that* much common sense.”

“I don’t know if I can grow anymore, but...if I became like Tomochika, maybe he would be happy with me...” Risley muttered, staring at her.

“All right, I think I’ve had enough!” Starting to feel awkward, Tomochika got up and left the spring. After changing behind a nearby rock, she headed back to the camp.

The others had more or less finished setting up. Numerous tents were arranged around the banks of the river. They all seemed designed to be used on the move.

“I kind of feel bad for goofing off in the hot spring while they were working.”

You have no obligation to help them set up. I don’t see anything wrong with you taking time to relax.

“Are you sure we’re hidden from the outside?” The crowd of tents certainly stood out. Even from a distance, someone would be able to see that there was an impromptu settlement in the area.

Perhaps it’s thanks to the vampire’s power, but that barrier is really something. From the outside, it appears as if there’s nothing here.

“All this talk of vampires and barriers makes this really feel like another world, doesn’t it?” Tomochika murmured, looking up at the sky, realizing it was a bit late to be saying that. Far overhead she could make out a floating rock, on top of which she could faintly see buildings. She hadn’t thought about it before, but there were people living up in the sky.

There were plenty of barriers and vampires in our own world, you know.

“Wait, seriously?!”

The hospital near our residence was run by a vampire. Their daughter turned seven people of her own. She was a proper vampire princess.

“Was I living in the middle of a light novel or something?!”

There are many things about your world that you are unaware of.

“Well, if guardian spirits exist, and people like Takatou exist, I suppose it’s not that hard to believe.” The most surprising part was that something so strange had been so close to her. She couldn’t fully accept the idea that she had been living in the same neighborhood as a vampire her entire life.

Hm. It seems no one is around, so this may be a good chance.

“A chance for what?”

To talk about what we’ll do next. You seem quite content to let yourself be pulled along by the current.

“You’re right, there.” Ever since coming to this world, Tomochika hadn’t done much in the way of making her own decisions. Even the thought of

returning home wasn't something she was sure was possible, so she had just been going along with Yogiri's plan.

First of all, there's no reason for us to work with these half-demons.

"You think so?" She considered them something like friends, but now that Mokomoko had brought it up, that wasn't necessarily a reason to stay with them.

Also, Carol and Ryouko. I believe you should be a bit more on guard against them.

"Really?" The suggestion surprised her.

Their original role was to monitor the boy, remember? Can you really trust them?

"They don't seem to have any bad intentions, though."

Intentions are irrelevant. If their objective is different from your own, then your paths will ultimately be different as well.

"Hmm. I guess I never really thought about it."

Still, what could she do? Crossing her arms thoughtfully as she walked, she suddenly noticed something that made her feel a bit uneasy. There was movement in the distance. Looking closely, she could see that something was approaching, heading towards them along the riverbank.

"Something is coming!"

Oh? Are they looking for us?

The encampment was in a secluded area. Euphemia had manipulated the trees to allow them to come this far into the woods, so it was unlikely that anyone would come across them by chance.

It was a group of people mounted on horses.

"Her barrier didn't do anything at all!"

They couldn't have been heading anywhere else. The mounted group was galloping straight for them.

Chapter 4 — What Are You, Ten Years Old?

Tomochika was able to see the approaching party with her superior eyesight. About ten soldiers on horseback, clad in military uniforms, were heading straight for them. As they drew closer, she began to recognize the outfits they were wearing as belonging to the Kingdom of Manii, where they had been staying up until the day before.

What does their army want with us? mused Mokomoko. The capital had been destroyed. There should have been more than enough work to keep the forces of Manii occupied near the city.

"Did we do something to make them chase us?"

Well, we killed an entire assassin's guild and an Archbishop, so we likely qualify as criminals.

"I guess so. I feel like I've gotten kind of numb to all the death."

But given the state the capital is in, I doubt they have any evidence on us, nor are they really in a position to be carrying out an investigation.

"Well, we've still got those things Rick gave us, so we should be able to talk to them."

Both Tomochika and Yogiri had received amulets from Richard, the third prince of Manii and current Swordmaster. The talismans demonstrated their connection to him and were likely to be useful while they remained in the kingdom. At the very least, it should have been enough to smooth things over with a single group of soldiers.

Shall we wake the boy?

"No, there's no reason to rely on him for everything."

Since those approaching were soldiers from their host kingdom, she figured they would be willing to listen. And if the situation became dangerous, Yogiri would probably wake up on his own anyway.

Turning around, Tomochika saw that the half-demons were already mounting a defense. At the head of the formation were Theodisia and

Euphemia. They were standing near the edge of the barrier, which was still invisible. Tomochika ran up next to them.

"I don't know much about magic, but is the barrier working as it should?" asked Theodisia.

"Yes, it is functioning normally," Euphemia answered. "Being a barrier set up by an Origin Blood, it shouldn't be easy to see through, but..."

From the outside, it was meant to appear as if nothing was there. But the mounted troop approached nonetheless, stopping just before the barrier. There were ten in all, with a generally even mix of men and women. They varied widely in age, but all were older than Tomochika. Their mounts were similarly armored.

The man leading the group met Tomochika's gaze, confirming that the barrier was having no effect.

"Umm..."

"We are the Invincible Battalion, serving under the second prince of Manii, Lord Darian! We have come to exterminate you!"

"'Invincible Battalion'? What are you, ten years old?" she snarked back, unable to help herself in response to the man's booming voice.

"How dare you! Do you intend to insult us?!"

"Since you've shown up out of nowhere and threatened to exterminate us, I think it's a bit late to worry about being insulted!"

"Jolt, we're not going to exterminate them," a young man said, stepping forward. Tomochika's instincts told her that this was Lord Darian. He had features that were similar to Richard's and carried himself differently than the rest of the troop.

"Is that so? I thought it would be too dangerous to leave a group of this size roaming free."

"And what do you plan to accomplish by threatening them?" He spoke with a calm elegance. Tomochika felt sure that they would be able to smooth things over. "These women are a valuable resource that has been stolen from our people. We need to return them to their owners intact."

"Why am I such an idiot?! Of course he's not a good person!"

Tomochika was once again convinced that there were no good men anywhere in the world. Even so, this one seemed better than most of the enemies they had met so far. She figured it had to be an improvement on the unrestrained tyrants (also known as the Sages) they had been dealing with up

to that point.

But now what? She looked over at Theodisia. Although the half-demon's expression was frigid, Tomochika knew that it hid a rage deep down. It wouldn't have surprised her if Theodisia had jumped forward and attacked the soldiers without warning.

"Can I interrupt for a minute?" she asked the prince, holding up her amulet. First, she needed to give them a chance to be reasonable. They could decide what to do after that. As she stepped forward, she could feel Theodisia's bloodlust recede a little. It seemed she was willing to let Tomochika talk things out first.

"Ah, I heard there were some friends of Rick's around. I guess they were talking about you. But why are you here? And why with these half-demons?"

"Oh, we just met them by chance. Umm, Second Prince, was it? Why are *you* here?" Tomochika silently cursed herself for not thinking of what to say beforehand. It was a sad excuse, but she'd simply felt pressured to force the conversation forward.

"Please call me Darian. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm somewhat weak when it comes to the lineal power held by the royal family, so I'm not too useful in the capital. Instead, I'm traveling around the country, setting the wrongs of the world right."

"And you came here to 'right' some 'wrong'?" The troop was obviously not there by chance. They had come to the area with a clear purpose.

"Hm, I see. You're from a different world, so you don't understand what's going on. In that case, don't worry; I won't hold you responsible."

It didn't feel like their conversation was making much ground, but at least he recognized that Tomochika was not a local. Either he had guessed it from her appearance or heard it from Rick at some point.

"Are you here to take these people away?"

"Correct. There was a serious incident of half-demon theft. We need to return them to their owners."

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on a second. These people were enslaved against their will. Don't you think that's wrong?"

"Taking another person's possessions is a crime. Is that not the same in any world?"

"They're...not possessions, though?"

"Well, they aren't just *things*, of course, but according to our country's

laws, half-demons are property. They have owners. Removing them doesn't change who they belong to."

"But they're not animals. You can't just own a person because they look a little different!"

"Hmm. I can't say I entirely disagree, but that's the law. We can't ignore it."

"All right, got it. Talking isn't going to work here." If that was how the laws of the land were, then trying to argue from a moral or ethical stance was pointless.

Isn't whether they are taken captive or not irrelevant to us? asked Mokomoko.

"You think I could just let this happen?" Tomochika whispered back. She could talk to Mokomoko without the others hearing her.

There's a famous saying: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Taking a stand against an entire country could be problematic for us.

After the king's death, the first prince had temporarily taken over his duties. But if he had been in the capital during Mana's invasion, it was quite possible that he too was now dead. In short, for the moment, the second prince might well have been the kingdom's ultimate authority.

Tomochika felt torn. In the end, she and Yogiri were outsiders. It wasn't really their place to interfere in the affairs of this world.

"I thought to wait and see how it would go, but it doesn't seem like this will be resolved through conversation," Euphemia remarked.

"I agree. There's nothing left to do but eliminate them," her sister agreed.

The two stepped forward, sending Tomochika back behind them.

"Now then, there are only ten of us and more than a hundred of you," Darian addressed them. "Trying to restrain all of you will take an awful lot of time. We want to bring you back with minimal injuries, so—"

"Who cares?"

Theodisia drew her sword, interrupting the prince's speech. A flash of black light shot forth from her weapon, a blade of darkness sweeping out to target the entire troop. The slash was wide enough to take out all ten soldiers at once, but not a single one of them was harmed. The moment the attack reached their uniforms and the horses' armor, it dissipated harmlessly into the air.

As if she had expected that, Euphemia raised her hand, preparing an

attack of her own. Her hand began to shine with a red light, which shot up into the sky, splitting into countless branches before falling back onto Darian's group like a waterfall of light.

The troop was engulfed in moments. Each strand of light held incredible power, tearing apart the ground and throwing clouds of smoke and steam into the air as the heat vaporized everything it touched.

"Did she do it?"

That's a flag, you know.

The forms of the mounted soldiers became visible again as the smoke cleared. They hadn't been wiped out. There wasn't even a speck of dust on them.

"It's a little embarrassing to have to say it, but our name, the Invincible Battalion, isn't just for show. Making magical items is my specialty. The uniforms we wear, and the armor of our horses, can stop any kind of physical or magical attack."

"That's impossible. Something like that couldn't possibly exist!"

"Then keep trying. Attack us as many times as you like. And once you've tired yourselves out and given up, will you come with us?"

Something sprang from the ground around the battalion's feet. Spears that looked like human spines shot upwards all at once, striking at the horses. But the moment the spears touched their armor, the weapons shattered harmlessly.

Euphemia continued to fire red spears made from her own blood, and Theodisia attempted to sweep the men away with her sword. They fought with every kind of attack they could muster. It was almost humorous.

As Darian and his soldiers watched calmly without lifting a finger, their would-be victims continued the desperate onslaught. The half-demons observing the encounter began to stir, turning and running as they realized they couldn't fight the soldiers.

"Bind," Darian murmured as he weathered the barrage of attacks without concern.

Something suddenly wrapped itself around Tomochika's body. Chains of light snaked around her, preventing her from moving. The same thing began to happen to the others around her as well—everyone except for the two who were fighting.

"We can't have you running away. If you don't think you can fight us,

just go back to your owners."

"Your magic is truly incredible, Lord Darian. Being able to restrain so many all at once..."

"It's not particularly difficult. Even you can use Bind, can't you, Jolt?"

"Yes, but my success rate is fairly low, and I could never target so many at once."

"Oh, really? All you have to do is picture your target in your head."

"That's impossible for ordinary people like us."

Darian and Jolt chatted idly as the fierce attacks continued to rain down on them.

"What is this?! I can't move!" cried Tomochika. The strands of light that had wrapped around her felt as solid as real chains. They bound both her arms and legs, holding her in place from head to toe. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make them budge.

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Even with her superior sense of balance, it was all she could do to remain on her feet. Most of the others had already fallen to the ground.

Oh? That's impressive.

"This isn't the time to be impressed! Do something!"

Something, you say? Well, I suppose there is one thing I can do.

"Really?!"

I have made considerable progress in analyzing Battle Song. There are a number of security flaws in the system. I should be able to nullify the entire program for a short time.

Battle Song was the name of the Gift that had been installed in her classmates when they had first come to this world. Most of the magic and skills that were used here operated through that system.

"Then do it!"

It won't work for long, so we need to make sure that our timing is perfect.

"How long?"

Thirty seconds at most. Not enough to run away. You would need to defeat Darian within that time. Can you manage it quickly enough?

Once she could move, Tomochika would have thirty seconds to defeat the prince. She decided that, as long as she could make contact, it should be possible. The main issue was the distance between them. More than half of her limited time would be consumed just by closing the gap.

"What's going on?"

Hearing a voice behind her, Tomochika turned around. Standing there, looking as sleepy as ever, was Yogiri.

Chapter 5 — I’m Not Used to Talking to People, So I’m Not Very Good at It

When he awoke, Yogiri was alone in the carriage. Tomochika and the others must have left him to sleep. It didn’t seem like they were moving, so the group was likely taking a break from their journey.

“It doesn’t feel like I was out for that long...”

Still groggy, he glanced at his watch. It had been about half a day. Considering how tired he’d been, it wouldn’t have been strange for him to have remained asleep for much longer. So the fact that he had woken up must have meant that he’d sensed the presence of death.

It wasn’t severe enough that he needed to act immediately, but it felt like something that might come back to bite him later if he didn’t deal with it now. The sense of danger was so faint, it was almost like looking through a mist.

Yogiri’s understanding was that they’d been looking for a place to relax. Risley’s objective had been to go to the capital to find him. Now that she had, there was no reason to hurry off anywhere else, but things were understandably chaotic around the capital at the moment. Staying in that area would have been inconvenient.

Yogiri stepped out of the carriage. They were in the wilderness, and there was a river nearby, along which numerous carriages had been parked. Large tents had been set up around them, so it looked as if a small settlement had sprung up. It reminded him of the traveling circuses he had seen in movies.

“I wish I knew what was going on. Guess I should ask someone.”

The presence of death was slowly growing stronger. It hovered over the entire area, so whatever it was could potentially kill everyone in the vicinity. He could tell when someone was specifically targeting him, but that didn’t seem to be the case here. It was more like the experience he’d had during his encounter with the Aggressor known as “the Darkness.” It was hard to say whether it had personally intended him any harm, but everything the

Darkness touched as it moved was transformed into dust and decay.

In short, something overwhelmingly powerful was nearby, but the chances of it actually reaching them were still fairly low. Yet the presence of death was getting stronger and stronger, which meant that the possibility was growing.

This looks bad, Yogiri thought. *But if there's anything going on around Dannoura, Mokomoko will tell me.*

He knew that Mokomoko would call in an instant if her descendant was in danger. Although the spirit's abilities seemed a bit inconsistent when it came to interacting with the physical world, he trusted her fully in her role as Tomochika's guardian. Even so, it was probably best to find them as soon as possible. He had been walking around for a while at this point and had yet to see any sign of them.

It sounded like there were people nearby, so he went in that direction. Making his way around the tents, he found Tomochika bound by glowing chains. Most of the others around her were in the same situation. Theodisia and Euphemia were fighting what appeared to be the enemy, although they looked like soldiers from the Kingdom of Manii.

"What's going on?"

His mind was still a little foggy, and he couldn't fully grasp the situation. But his number one priority was to help Tomochika.

As he approached, she turned to face him. "Takatou! Where have you been?!"

"I'm guessing that was rhetorical, but I was sleeping."

"Even with all this noise?!" He was indeed a deep sleeper. There wasn't much he could do about it.

Yogiri stepped around in front of her. She certainly wasn't an unpleasant sight. The way the chains wrapped around her torso did a good job of accentuating her chest. While they appeared to be magical, they seemed to have a physical element too.

"I think I might be into this."

"Stop staring at me and help!"

"But this is the first time I've seen a sight like this."

"If that's all you want, you can have your own showing later on, but for now just do something about it!"

Feeling like it was a wasted opportunity, Yogiri killed the chains binding

her. They immediately dissipated. As expected, they hadn't been physical objects.

Tomochika was the only one who had been released. Freeing everyone else sounded like more work than it was worth. Yogiri's ability was fundamentally intended to kill living things. While he could certainly target anything that he cared to, his accuracy dropped when it came to inanimate objects. So killing the chains right in front of him was doable, but killing the chains that were binding the many half-demons scattered across a wide area in all sorts of positions all at once was a tougher proposition.

"Obviously, I've woken up in the middle of a bad situation. Can you tell me what's going on?"

The half-demons were being restrained by fetters made of light, a group of mounted soldiers had arrived, and while Theodisia and Euphemia were attacking them with vigor, their assault wasn't having any effect. He could see that much with his eyes, but it didn't explain why any of it was happening.

"These people have come to take back the half-demons," Tomochika said, going on to quickly summarize the rest. Perhaps luckily, the soldiers had yet to realize that Yogiri had appeared, so they weren't paying the two of them much attention. They seemed content to wait for the sisters to give up their attack.

"This is such a mess," Yogiri muttered, feeling torn. If they wanted to follow the law, these representatives of the Kingdom of Manii would know the rules best, but was the law acceptable in the first place? For someone like Yogiri, who had traveled there from a very different world and knew nothing of the history or needs of this place, he didn't have much of a position to argue from.

But if I have to pick a side...

He recalled the treatment of the half-demons in the tower. In order to extract magical energy more efficiently from them, they had been mutated and deformed to the point where they no longer looked like people. The ones who had subjected them to such horrific treatment had had their reasons, but it wasn't something that he was willing to forgive.

"I guess we should see about talking things through first."

"We already did that!"

"If they aren't as power-hungry as the Sages, it's worth trying."

“It annoys me that you think you could get through to them when we couldn’t.”

Yogiri walked over to Darian. Noticing his arrival, Theodisia and Euphemia broke off their attack, falling back to his side.

“Will you help us? We can’t make any headway here. We’ve done everything we can, but it’s useless.”

“It’s hard to believe there are humans who can withstand the power of an Origin Blood.”

“Let me try talking to them.”

Stopping a few meters away from the troop’s leader, Yogiri looked straight at him. From Tomochika’s description, he was the second prince. He certainly seemed the part.

“Since you’ve chosen this moment to show up, you must be their representative, right?”

“Representative? I don’t know if I’m qualified.” Yogiri supposed that’s how it must have looked with him standing at the head of the group now.

“Have you given up yet? I’d really like to avoid violence, if possible. I would be most grateful if you would just return with us. Of course, we only intend to take the stolen half-demons back. The ones with no legal owners have no one to be returned to, after all.”

His demeanor was calm and confident. He didn’t seem to have any sense of guilt over what he was doing. He clearly didn’t think that it was wrong.

“I’m not a fan of fighting either. So could you just leave us alone?”

“Hm. Do you not understand the situation you’re in? You should be able to tell that your attacks aren’t going to work on us.”

“If our attacks don’t work, and you don’t attack us, we won’t get anywhere.”

“Is that supposed to be a negotiation tactic?” Tomochika commented as she came up beside him.

“I thought I’d give it a try, but I’m not used to talking to people, so I’m not very good at it.”

“Then why did you volunteer to be a spokesperson?!” she replied, exasperated, although she knew well that he simply preferred not to attack someone who wasn’t actively targeting him.

“I guess you don’t quite understand the difference in strength between us. I have no choice, then.” Darian stretched his right hand upwards. Light shot

from it into the sky, drawing a complicated geometric formation in the air. It looked like a multilayered magic circle. The collection of letters and shapes expanded into a sphere, which then stretched downwards, becoming a column of light that covered a large area nearby. And then the chillingly massive, awe-inspiringly bright column vanished without a trace.

Everyone watching was bewildered. It was too quiet now. The land that had been there previously had vanished, but it was hard to trust their eyes even with the truth right in front of them. In place of the landscape was a vast emptiness, a hole so deep that they couldn't see the bottom. It was like the scenery had just been erased—like it had never existed at all.

Right. So, that's the feeling of death I was getting earlier, Yogiri thought. If they were hit with that magic directly, the entire half-demon camp would disappear in an instant, and the range was so large that there was no way they could escape.

The half-demons sank into despair. In the face of the prince's overwhelming power, they quickly lost the will to resist.

"I would expect nothing less of Lord Darian!"

"You just changed the whole landscape like it was nothing!"

"I guess we'll have to redraw our maps now, huh?"

"No, he was still going easy on them. After all, he let them see the magic circle so clearly."

"What part of that was 'going easy'?!"

"Do you really need to go that far for some half-demons? Oh, look, the poor things are frozen in fear now."

The soldiers were busy heaping praise on their leader. They had been silent up until then but were now openly and loudly applauding him.

"Seems like things are getting worse, doesn't it?" Tomochika observed.

"Yeah, they don't really strike you as professional soldiers, do they?"

When Darian had been the only one speaking, his men had maintained a solemn air. But once his subordinates started chattering amongst themselves, the atmosphere had changed completely.

"Now then, what do you say to that? Are you willing to come quietly?"

"I mean, that's nice as a demonstration and all, but you're planning on taking them alive, aren't you? So what's the point of showing us all that?"

"Well, this is a problem. Even after my demonstration, you still don't seem to understand the danger you're in."

“Give it up, Darian. They don’t get that you’re taking pity on them. They’re the kind of idiots where you’ve gotta kill a few people in front of them first,” one of the soldiers said, moving his horse up.

“But... Ah, I see. If we kill one of the half-demons who wasn’t reported as stolen, it won’t be an issue. The ones with no owners are basically wild animals, after all.”

“No. This time it’s my turn.” Yogiri answered before Darian could take action.

“Your turn?”

“I can see that just telling you to go home won’t work, so I’ll have to kill whichever one of you is closest to me after the prince.”

“Takatou! That’s—”

“I know what you’re going to say, but that’s the best I can do.”

Tomochika was probably going to argue that there was no real need to kill anyone. The soldiers hadn’t actually harmed them yet. It was hard to say unequivocally that they were bad people. But taking the half-demons’ side meant becoming an enemy of the kingdom, and that meant fighting the kingdom’s army. While he would prefer to keep the damage to a minimum, if he tried to kill only parts of them like he had done with Lain, the threat that he posed would likely not be fully apparent, and he would be forced to continue. Even as a warning shot, he’d need to kill at least one person.

“Go for it. If you’re going to kill someone, see if you can take me out!”

The man that had moved forward a moment before urged his horse another few steps ahead, stopping directly in front of Yogiri as if challenging him.

“Bring it on,” he snorted. “What do you even think you can do? What could you possibly do against the invincible armor that Darian made—”

“Die.” Yogiri pointed at the man as he spoke, making his intentions clear to everyone.

“Are you satisfied? Then...” Darian’s voice abruptly cut off as the soldier fell from his horse.

The atmosphere changed at once. This development was beyond anything the soldiers had ever faced. Yogiri waited for the shock of it to work its way through the group. Killing them all would have been easy enough, but he had no desire to proactively harm people. Even if just a temporary solution, his only goal was to get them to leave.

“I can kill anyone just by thinking it. So please go.”

You’re not going to wipe them out? Mokomoko asked.

“If we leave the country, I’m sure they’ll stop chasing us.”

It could become more of a hassle later, but right now these people weren’t specifically targeting him or Tomochika. He was reluctant to take them all out without further provocation.

“How dare you! What do you think you know about our Invincible Battalion?!”

“That you’re clearly not invincible.”

They must have understood the danger, but the troop didn’t seem to consider retreat an option yet.

“Fine! There is no need for Lord Darian to dirty his own hands! My magic will—” a woman behind Darian shouted, but she was unable to finish. Just like the man before her, she promptly fell motionless from her horse.

“It should be obvious, but if you attack me, I’ll fight back. Oh, and I won’t attack anyone who tries to escape, so feel free to run away.”

He had planned to carry out his demonstration with a single death, but nothing was ever easy.

Once again, Yogiri was reminded of his poor negotiating skills.

Chapter 6 — But That Hard Work Was Just Selecting the Magic from the System Menu Over and Over, Wasn't It?

Jolt had memories of his previous life. He had been reincarnated here. But before that, he had lived like garbage.

Although his childhood was perfectly average, his failure on the high school entrance exams cast a long shadow over the rest of his life. He quickly fell into a self-destructive cycle, shutting himself away from the world well into middle age. His parents weren't particularly wealthy, but he leeched off them nonetheless, a parasite producing nothing valuable of his own. That's certainly how society would have described him, anyway, but that's not how he saw himself. Even as he approached the age of fifty, he still felt like he had a chance to do more.

His cause of death was most likely starvation. Living his life as a shut-in, the food had eventually stopped coming. At his usual meal time one day, nothing had arrived. No matter how hard he stomped on the floor or how loudly he yelled, there was no answer. Yet even then, the thought never occurred to him to go downstairs and check. He was like a baby bird in spirit, knowing only how to open his mouth and wait for the food to be placed there by someone else. Even a life-threatening inconvenience was still just an inconvenience.

Two days passed without food. He finally forced himself to stand. Stepping out into the hallway, he made his way downstairs for what must have been the first time in twenty years. Dragging his overweight body as best he could, he reached the living room.

The television had been left on, and his mother was curled up on the couch. It was his first time seeing her in a long while, and she looked much older than he remembered. Had she always been so small? As that thought crossed his mind, it was immediately blown away by anger. He was furious

that she would be sleeping in front of the TV while he was starving.

"Hey, Ma! Where's the food?!"

There was no response. When he shook her to wake her up, a shiver ran through him. She was unimaginably light and offered no resistance.

As a result of his self-imprisonment, his family had fallen apart. His mother, left alone to care for him and the house, must have reached her physical and mental limits. Of course, Jolt hadn't recognized any of his mother's suffering. All he cared about was his own comfort.

And then he died. It sounded insane, but he couldn't even make himself leave the house. There was some food left at first, but once that was gone, it was all over. Never mind going out and working, he couldn't even bear the thought of ordering online if it meant having to see the person who would deliver it. People often say that when faced with death, a human can manage anything. But not Jolt. That was it for him.

Luckily, he didn't remember much about the time immediately preceding his death. If he did, he would probably still have been tormented by the pain of hunger long after being reincarnated.

The next thing he knew, he was a baby. At first, he panicked. He couldn't see anything, he could barely move, and he didn't understand what had happened. He didn't fully comprehend the situation until he was old enough to stand on his own. Perhaps because he still had the memories of his past life, he was able to pick up the language very quickly. But he was no longer in Japan. This was a world with magic and monsters. He was the third son of a wealthy noble family in the Kingdom of Manii, and his name was Jolt, or so he learned from people around him.

He didn't really believe in God, but he thanked him anyway. It was like he was being told to try one more time. One small mistake had led him astray in his previous life. But armed with those memories, this time he could do better.

Being born into a noble family was also a good sign. While there was magic in this world, not everyone could use it. A supernatural power known as the Gift had to be passed down from one person to another. As a member of a noble household, his family had an exceptionally powerful Gift to pass on to him.

Jolt's class was Rune Fighter. He was capable of using close-quarters combat techniques and magic at the same time, making his class one capable

of fighting at any range. He was said to be a prodigy. He trained from a young age, and his knowledge of his past life made him extremely intelligent. An easy future was waiting for him here.

Or so he had thought.

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Jolt was in shock as he lay on his stomach on the training room floor. This was all wrong. His opponent was supposed to be eating the floor and looking up at him, not the other way around.

When he had first entered the school, he'd effortlessly defeated the cruel older students' attempts to haze him, cementing his own place in the social order. Their bullying of him had been a singular occurrence, one that would never happen again while he was a student there. As an upperclassman, he should have been able to crush the upstart newcomers with ease.

When the match had started, he'd strengthened his body with magical energy and snapped around behind his opponent, intending to strike at the boy from his blind spot, but the underclassman was already gone.

"How...how did that happen?!"

He had intended to go easy on the younger student. His opponent was royalty, after all. While that didn't mean much within the confines of the school, he recognized that he couldn't go *too* far with him. Regardless, he hadn't held back when it came to his movements. He'd circled behind his opponent as fast as possible, and the next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground.

Jolt should have had an overwhelming advantage. While the others had still barely been aware of their surroundings, he had been training. Rather than coasting through life without any effort as he had done the first time around, he had been working hard every day. Even as a baby, unable to move around, he had regularly practiced his defense magic and had become extremely proficient, capable of stopping any attack.

But that "hard work" was just selecting the magic from the system menu over and over, wasn't it?

The voice echoing inside Jolt's head shocked him, prompting him to look around. The prince was standing behind him, looking exactly as one might imagine royalty to look. Second prince of the Kingdom of Manii, Lord

Darian was the standout student among the new arrivals that year.

Jolt panicked. The prince had read his mind. That was the only way he could be talking to him within his head.

Sorry for surprising you, but don't worry; I can only pry my way into the surface level of your consciousness through the Gift. I can't look deep into your heart or anything like that.

There were techniques that allowed telepathy in this world, but as far as Jolt knew, they required the consent of both parties involved. There shouldn't have been a way to unilaterally access someone's mind this way.

Well, even if you were using it against nothing, activating your magic repeatedly like that still makes it stronger. I suppose that could be considered "making an effort."

Feeling like he was being mocked, Jolt rose back to his feet, turning to face Darian once again.

You couldn't beat me even when attacking from behind. Do you really want to continue this?

"Shut up!" He couldn't lose. If he lost here, it would happen all over again. If he broke once, he would never be able to stand again. He had learned that lesson well enough in his past life.

He decided to use Disintegrate. As the name suggested, it was a spell that brought about total ruin. It could be focused into a thin beam of light to pierce through anything, or widened into a large area to create large-scale destruction. Of course, he wouldn't get away with merely being blamed for killing a member of the royal family. The entire school would be destroyed, and everyone in it would die along with him. But he didn't care. If he was going to lose, he would be better off annihilating everyone else in the process.

"Take this!"

The spell activated, but the scene he had imagined never came to pass. Everything should have been instantly reduced to rubble, scattered across an empty desert, but nothing had changed. His magical energy was almost completely drained, so there was no doubt that the spell had activated. But there had been no effect.

It was always possible that Darian himself could have survived such a spell. He could have blocked it with a higher-rank defense spell or reduced the incoming damage. But there was no way that *nothing at all* would

happen. Even if Darian could defend himself, he shouldn't have been able to protect the people and buildings around him.

Sorry, but I took the liberty of analyzing and neutralizing your spell.

Jolt collapsed. It had never occurred to him that Darian could do such a thing. Magic was nothing more than a skill that activated once it was selected. He had thought that any further analysis or research was meaningless.

Darian stepped closer, but Jolt hung his head in shame.

The truth is, I failed to stop you the first time. I was fine, but the school was reduced to dust. So this was my second try. I couldn't neutralize your power as easily as I'd thought.

Although Darian spoke lightly, his words sent a chill down Jolt's spine. If that were true, the prince could manipulate time and space. Jolt couldn't possibly fight someone like that.

Who are you? he thought.

I'm not all that impressive. Just like your class is Rune Fighter, mine is System Engineer.

Jolt had never heard of such a class, but he vaguely understood what it meant. It was the power to rule over the Gift that governed this world. Darian could neutralize any skill or magic used through the system, and could manipulate time and space in the same way.

Kill me. What could he possibly do against an opponent like that? He sank into despair. It was over for him. His second chance at life had been a waste.

If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't have used such a roundabout method. Darian kneeled down to look him in the eyes. *I was told not to kill you, after all. Besides, that spell was really interesting. How did you learn to use it? Would you let me research you a bit more?*

Jolt unsteadily raised his head. He wasn't quite sure what Darian was asking.

Don't worry; I'm not going to do anything to you. I can figure it out myself if you just tell me about it.

Jolt had no choice but to surrender.

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Over time, Darian continued to seek out other reincarnated humans and

add them to his group. It turned out there were plenty of people like Jolt. As long as there wasn't a huge difference in the environment they'd been reincarnated into, the gap between their previous lives and their new ones correlated with their individual strengths in this world. For Jolt, who had expended no effort and accomplished nothing in his previous life, there was no hope of matching the others. After all, anyone could accomplish the basic level of effort he had put forth.

With these reincarnated individuals, Darian created a group that came to be known as the Invincible Battalion. It wasn't that he was looking for raw strength. If he wanted power, he was plenty strong on his own.

Jolt had a difficult time understanding the prince's motives. He was royalty, but had no interest in the throne. With the level of power he possessed, he should have had no problem conquering the Underworld beneath the city, but he never even made the attempt. According to him, the Underworld had become an irreplaceable part of the kingdom's culture, so it was not particularly advantageous to change that. He had offered the thought as if it would have been an easy feat for him to seal off the Underworld forever.

Instead, he traveled the kingdom, enjoying the sights and helping the people. It was common for royalty to travel around Manii, but it was rare for them to be out for such long stretches of time. He would wander the land, leaping in to assist at the first sign of trouble. Jolt figured he must have been searching for something.

"Half-demons? What's the point of stealing something that's so hard to use?"

One day, Darian had come to learn about the theft of the half-demons. If it had been an issue of one or two being stolen, he wouldn't have bothered mobilizing the Invincible Battalion. The demihumans were nothing more than objects, and their owners were more often than not high-ranking nobles, so it was nothing more than petty theft. The owners could have easily solved the problem themselves.

But when it became clear that the same group of renegades was stealing other half-demons, the situation became more urgent. On top of that, one of the culprits was said to be a vampire. For a normal human, resolving the incident would be a challenge.

It was exactly the kind of affair that Darian was needed for.

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"Go for it. If you're going to kill someone, see if you can take me out!"

Robert moved his horse in front of the young man, challenging him. Jolt couldn't help but look at the boy with pity. He was Japanese in appearance...so very unlike Jolt. He must have been transported to this world rather than having been reincarnated.

Of course, they couldn't relax merely because their opponent had been summoned instead. They needed to analyze the stranger's powers regardless. But the results showed that he was just a normal boy with no sign at all of the Gift. And even if he had possessed the Gift, it would have been useless against Darian's invincible armor.

"Die." The boy pointed at Robert. It was almost amusing. If that was his last attempt at fighting back, it only made him look like a fool.

Jolt could imagine what would become of the boy after this. He wouldn't be recognizable as human. That was a habit of Robert's. His comrade would inflict as much pain as possible, enough that his victim would wish for death, but he would never grant it.

Instead, Robert himself collapsed. Jolt stared in shock. His fellow soldier wavered for a moment, fell from his horse, and lay motionless on the ground.

"I can kill anyone just by thinking it. So please go."

The boy spoke like a patient teacher might to a slow student. There was resignation there, as if he knew that his opponents wouldn't be able to wrap their minds around what he was saying.

But Jolt understood the words. Robert had been killed by this boy. He just didn't know how it was possible. Robert's uniform was part of the invincible armor that Darian had developed. The armor was miraculously powerful. The same power that had protected Darian from Jolt's magic had been woven into the very fabric of those uniforms. That power could neutralize any spell, prevent any sort of status ailment, or stop any attack element completely. That was the reward gained from having control of the Gift that governed this world. That was why they were *invincible*.

Even though Darian had made the uniforms on a whim, until now, no one had ever been able to penetrate their defenses. For someone bound by the system, it defied belief. Power in this world meant the Gift, which was

nothing more than a phenomenon processed by the system. So no skills produced by the Gift could ever break through their armor.

"How dare you! What do you think you know about our Invincible Battalion?!" Jolt blurted out. He wanted to continue, to say, "We are invincible, and there is no way you can overcome the armor that Darian made for us!"

"Fine! There is no need for Lord Darian to dirty his own hands!" the Witch of the Frozen Flame, Elayna, suddenly shouted. "My magic will—"

Jolt tried to stop her. She had no concept of restraint. If she used her power, the entire area would be consumed in a gale of absolute zero winds. Though Jolt and his companions would be fine thanks to their armor, the half-demons they had come to retrieve would be slaughtered.

But his fears were for nothing. Elayna's voice had cut off in the middle of her speech as she too fell from her horse.

Jolt could tell that the two of them were dead. He could see their deceased status through the system as well, as could every other member of his troop.

"It should be obvious, but if you attack me, I'll fight back. Oh, and I won't attack anyone who tries to escape, so feel free to run away."

The boy must have been referring to killing Elayna. But he couldn't have done anything that time. He hadn't even told her to die, like he had done with Robert.

"That's insane," Bernard muttered. "It's impossible!" A moment after drawing his sword in rage, he immediately fell to the ground.

Three dead now. There was no more room for doubt. The boy was telling the truth. He could kill anyone by thinking it and could counter anyone who tried to attack him.

"Resurrection!" Saria used her power on their fallen companions. Her resurrection magic was on a whole other level. She had once come across a scene where dozens of people had been torn apart, to the point of being completely unrecognizable, and had revived them all at once. She had come to be feared as the Witch of Blasphemy for the way she could play with others' lives.

But now, her magic seemed ineffective. There was no apparent reason for the others to have died. Even after falling off their horses, there were no apparent signs of injury on them. Yet they were dead. Motionless.

"What's going on?! Mass Resurrection!" Saria turned her magic on the

boy himself, performing the taboo of using Resurrection Magic on a living person. It was a twisted application of the spell, which would force the target's body and soul to merge together into a twisted abomination of their former self.

But the result was the same. Saria fell from her horse and didn't move again.

"Hey, are you guys stupid or something?" the boy asked with a sigh.

This time, none of the others attempted to attack him. Four of their number were now dead for no discernible reason. Jolt didn't have the confidence to believe that he alone would be the one to survive. He was aware of that much. And the others seemed to feel the same. They understood that even if they couldn't explain it, the situation was too dangerous to try anything more.

They all stopped moving. The snorting of their restless horses was the only sound in the air.

This is wrong. There's no way this can be real!

Jolt had been happy here. He had escaped his previous worthless life and become a new person. Things had been going so well. Wielding his own power for his own whims had set him back, but swearing fealty to an even greater power had brought him real joy.

He felt guilty over the prospect of letting his desires run rampant, killing anyone who angered him and taking any woman that caught his eye. Those with power could do whatever they wanted, but even if that was what he wanted deep down, he didn't have the confidence for it. Even without restrictions, he would have been at a loss on his own.

Jolt found more happiness in serving someone strong, like Darian. There was no need for him to worry about right and wrong. No matter the situation, Darian was in the right. Jolt was satisfied with that. So if he treated these half-demons as less than human, or killed civilians who got in their way, as long as they had Darian's approval, it was okay. It was just another step on their journey of setting the world right. That was all there was to it. No matter how complicated the incident, even if the Demon Lord's own henchmen interfered, regardless of whether their enemy was a vampire, it was all the same. Darian would solve everything, and his Battalion would praise him for it. This time would be no different.

And yet, four of his comrades were gone. That inspired fear. Although the

boy standing in front of them wasn't the least bit threatening to look at, Jolt's companions had been struck down without being able to offer the slightest resistance. Everything felt wrong, like the dots just weren't connecting right, as if he had missed some important detail or his memories were completely off.

The boy had some sort of inexplicable power, but Jolt had no idea how it worked, and the fact that he didn't understand it was the most terrifying part of all. If that power had followed a logical path, they could have guarded against it, and he could even have accepted his companions' deaths. But there was none of that with this boy. There was no logic, no cause for the effect. Those people had just died. It was irrational.

Jolt looked at Darian plaintively. The prince would be able to do something. He had no choice but to trust in him.

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Chapter 7 — Would a Super Talented, Super Hot Guy Still Be Happy after Reincarnating?

The man who later came to be known as Darian had reached the end after living a full life. Born to a wealthy family, he had been raised wanting for nothing. But rather than let his good fortunes go to his head, he'd studied hard and ended up becoming one of the wealthiest men on the planet. There was no dark underside to his business, and he even took on great philanthropic projects that had significant global impacts. He married the woman he passionately loved, was blessed with a family that loved him just as much, and when his time finally came, countless people mourned his passing.

His life had truly been full of happiness. He couldn't say that he had no regrets at all, but he had expended every bit of effort on accomplishing the things he wanted to do. With his wealth, good looks, fame, and power, it was easy to accept that any goal he failed to achieve could not have been accomplished by anyone. His life had almost seemed too good to be true.

"Yay! I'm Malna, from Malnarilna!"

So when he found himself conscious after death, and a young girl energetically jumped out to meet him, it wasn't hard for him to accept his situation. He was a phenomenally lucky man. Such bizarre and unexpected things happening in his favor were par for the course.

"And who are you?"

"I'm God!"

"Oh, really? I'm familiar with a number of religions, but I've never heard of one with such a cute young girl for their god."

"I'm not any of the gods you know. Do you realize you're dead?"

"I do. I'm a little surprised, though. I didn't think there'd be any life after death."

“Technically, there isn’t. Consciousness and memories—actually, we normally just call it the soul—rarely survive after death!”

He wasn’t at all surprised to hear that he was one of the few exceptions. He was well aware of just how special he was.

“What is your business with me?”

“I’m going to reincarnate you as my pawn! I’ll give you a new body, some fancy new powers, all sorts of stuff like that!”

He chuckled. “I suppose I don’t have the right to refuse?”

“’Course not! I’m a god, you know?”

“What is it you would like me to do?”

“Live however you want! We’re bored. We just want to watch.”

“‘We’?”

“I’ve got a partner who’s looking to reincarnate the worst guy she can possibly find, figuring that even if such a guy gets another chance, he’ll still end up being awful.”

“I see. So what was the idea behind picking me?”

“Would a super talented, super hot guy still lead a happy second life?”

“Ah, like the prince and the pauper?”

“Who knows? You might end up being born really poor! You’ll have to wait and see what happens!”

The girl abruptly disappeared, and the man was reincarnated.

Darian was born the second prince of the Kingdom of Manii. If that was a result of random chance, it seemed his lucky streak had carried over to this new world. Everything was smooth sailing for him. Even without extra powers, his life was easy as anyone could imagine.

With the knowledge and experience from his past life, being born into a royal family gave him all the resources he needed to ride along effortlessly. Even being in such a different environment changed little for him. If he did his best slowly but surely, he would always get the best results. If anything, he was a bit disappointed. Even after dying and being reborn, life just wasn’t that difficult for him. So what could he do to make things more interesting?

He decided to save humanity.

Someday, he might become the ruler of Manii. It could likely be accomplished with minimal effort on his part, but that would be boring, nothing more than a future of tedium. He wanted to do something challenging, something that no one else had done. Something that no one

thought *could* be done.

Humanity in this world was a truly fragile thing. From the ancient armies of the Demon Lords to the intrusions of foreign gods, the attacks of the Aggressors, and the reign of those known as Sages, terrifying threats snapped at them from all sides. So he would eliminate them all and create a world where humanity was united. He thought that sounded interesting.

To that end, he would need to push the powers he possessed to the absolute limit. The god had given him two abilities. One was the chance to try again any time he died. Once dead, he could go back as many as ten days into the past. He could choose the exact time and date to return to. While it was an enormously powerful ability, it still meant feeling the sting of death. It was only really useful as an emergency escape.

The other power was the ability to manipulate the Gift. This new world of his possessed a system called Battle Song, through which magic and special skills could be made into reality. He had been given the class of System Engineer, an irregular class that would never appear naturally.

However, even though a System Engineer held the greatest potential the Gift could offer, it was still only potential. Manipulating the system directly required very involved procedures and complex instructions. It would be beyond the comprehension of most people and a wasted talent.

But Darian was a genius. Through persistent effort and studying, he gradually learned how to wield the power to its utmost limits.

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When Darian was twelve years old, he entered a school for the children of nobles and royalty.

“Hey, I’m Rilna from Malnarilna!”

Time suddenly froze, and a young girl appeared out of nowhere.

“Are you a friend of the god I met before?”

“That’s right! She’s Malna and I’m Rilna!”

“How can I help you?”

“I have a request. There’s a kid at this school named Jolt. He’s hilariously full of himself, so he’ll probably try to pick a fight with you, but could you let him live?”

That must have been the “absolute worst person” Malna had previously

told him about.

"I thought you were just going to watch whatever happened?"

"I mean, yeah, but him dying here would be super boring, you know?"

"Okay. I just need to go easy on him, right?"

"Great! As a thank-you, I'll give you this time control power I'm using now."

With that, Rilna disappeared and time began to move again.

A few days after the entrance ceremony, just as the god had predicted, an older student named Jolt called him out. The older boy made it sound like he wanted a friendly competition, so other students had packed themselves into the training room to watch.

Jolt's strength was rather lackluster. Darian couldn't possibly have lost, but if he hadn't been warned beforehand, he might have killed him by accident. Instead, he was able to crush Jolt and take him on as one of his subordinates.

The incident instilled in him an interest in other reincarnated people. Many of them had special forms of the Gift. Analyzing them would help Darian's own abilities to grow stronger and might give him clues about how to manipulate the system.

Once he began searching, those who had been reincarnated or summoned to this world were fairly easy to find. Though they often tried to hide it, most of them were so proud that they couldn't disguise their abilities and were exposed rather quickly.

Darian decided to recruit them. If left alone, they were liable to start some sort of disaster sooner or later. Having them all in one place so that he could manage them would make it easier to keep them in line and would also be convenient for the purposes of studying them.

At some point, the group he had pulled together became known as the Invincible Battalion. Naturally, they drew the attention of the Sages, but thanks to being a member of the royal family, Darian was spared from having to join their ranks. If the option had existed, becoming a Sage would have been quite advantageous to him. But a Sage had the crippling limitation of being unable to kill other Sages. For Darian, who planned to one day wipe them out, that was a problem. And even if he had become a Sage, it wouldn't have allowed him to exceed the limitations of the system.

Darian had discovered that there were those who considered the Gift to be

nothing at all. The Sages, who were supposed to have the ultimate form of the Gift, were outmatched by those known as the Aggressors. How would he be able to defeat *them*?

It wasn't long before he began searching for a path to godhood.

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After graduation, Darian expanded his area of operation. He began traveling around the Kingdom of Manii. The royal family's strength came from using their power to protect the people, who in turn did everything they could to support them, so the second prince touring the countryside wasn't anything special. He would travel around, gathering those who had been reincarnated, inspecting the seals, and defeating the demons that invaded their lands.

All of this was, of course, for the sake of increasing his own strength. In order to save humanity, he would first need absolute power in combat. Darian's actions towards that goal were seen by the world as him trying to help the people, a notion he felt no need to disabuse them of. And while his ultimate objective was to acquire power for himself, he refused to overlook the suffering of his people. If he was to do something as grand as saving all of humanity, he needed to start by saving those struggling in his own kingdom. That was an obvious conclusion.

Beyond that, having a good reputation made it easier for him to gather information. Even word of seemingly trivial incidents and rumors made their way to him eventually.

In one town, he began to hear repeated reports of half-demons being stolen.

"Half-demons? What's the point of stealing something that's so hard to use?"

"Apparently they go for quite a price on the magic market," Jolt explained.

Half-demons were rare and quite useful. For those who knew how to make use of them, they were a valuable commodity.

"But if they were common burglars, surely they wouldn't target half-demons. After all, they haven't been stealing any other valuables."

Curious, Darian investigated the incident, at which point he made an

unexpected discovery: the culprits were half-demons themselves. The number of their kind in the wild was exceedingly small. Even if individually strong, they shouldn't have had the strength to assault a human city and liberate their comrades so easily. It was widely accepted that once captured, no one would come to save them.

But there had been no violence so far either. Half-demons served in a variety of roles, from servants to prisoners, ranging from being physically restrained to magically locked away. In every case, the creatures in question had simply disappeared without anyone realizing it until later.

Looking into the case further, Darian discovered that there was a vampire among the rogue half-demons. A vampire could charm the owners, manipulating them into setting their property free.

Darian moved out to retrieve the stolen goods. He would take back that which had been unjustly seized. That was a given, but he had also taken a considerable interest in the alleged vampire. Although "Vampire" was a class within the Battle Song system, it was said that such beings had existed in this world well before the arrival of the Sages, so he felt there was some value in studying one.

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"This is your doing, is it?" Darian asked calmly, glancing back at his panicking soldiers.

The boy standing before them was disguising his abilities, but behind that disguise he had no Gift at all. In short, if he *was* responsible for the deaths of Darian's people, he was using a power entirely unrelated to Battle Song.

"That's right. If you understand, please leave."

"I can't do that."

"Why not? You can't take the half-demons back, so you might as well give up."

"I wouldn't have thought that it needed explaining, but do you know what half-demons are used for?"

The boy thought for a moment. "Barriers?"

He didn't seem to know precisely what purpose they served, but he'd clearly had some exposure to the idea.

"Yes. That makes this a lot easier to explain. There are numerous threats

to the people of this world. Keeping them at bay requires a barrier, and half-demons are needed for those."

"Why?"

"I don't like the idea of treating people as numbers, but if you could sacrifice a hundred to save a million, don't you think that's worth it? That's what being part of a greater whole is all about, isn't it?"

"I understand what you're trying to say, but why should I care?"

"Takatou!" the girl beside him interjected. "Can you try to be a bit more tactful?!"

His companion seemed to have far more reasonable sensibilities.

"Do you really understand?" Darian asked. "By saving this small number of half-demons, you're causing the deaths of countless innocents."

"You're strong, aren't you? Why don't you just kill whatever you people have been locking up?"

"We don't know what will emerge once those seals are broken. The safest option is to maintain the status quo."

Darian found it unlikely that he would be unable to kill anything that might be freed, but he had no idea what such a battle would look like or what the wider ramifications might be. It was possible that a battle would cause unnecessary casualties. If his goal was to save humanity, that would surely defeat the purpose.

"The truth is, I don't care much about the half-demons anymore," the prince said as he dismounted his horse. "The few we have left can be reorganized to ensure the most dangerous seals are maintained. *You* are the reason I can't back down."

"Because I killed your friends?"

"That too. Your actions here constitute murder within our kingdom. I'm not sure exactly how you did it, but you admitted it yourself, and I, as a royal, stood witness, so you won't be able to escape accountability."

"I know you probably don't care, but I was only defending myself."

When the boy had killed Darian's subordinates, he hadn't so much as twitched an eyebrow. This world was far from peaceful, and even Darian had moments when he needed to take the lives of others, but that didn't mean he felt nothing as he killed them. No matter how evil they had been, he always hesitated when it came to taking a human life. This boy, however, didn't seem to have felt anything at all. That was one reason Darian couldn't let him

live.

"You killed my companions, who hadn't done anything to you yet. Don't you feel the least bit guilty?"

"If I hadn't acted, I would have died. I didn't have a choice."

"Is that so? It still seems to me that you went too far. Nothing that happened excuses your actions. Objectively, you have no proof. You only thought they were going to attack you, so you killed them. That's hardly sufficient reasoning."

"I'm not trying to make excuses, and I don't care if you accept them. All I want is for you to leave."

The boy was clearly growing irritated, but he wasn't making any move to harm anyone else. However, if Darian tried to apprehend him, it was a certainty that Darian himself would, almost mechanically, be dispatched without hesitation.

"You can kill people with a single thought. It takes no action on your part."

"That's right."

"And whenever you feel someone is going to hurt you, you kill them before they have a chance to do so. In short, it depends entirely on your mood. You could kill someone merely because they rub you the wrong way. Do you realize how dangerous you are?"

"Of course I do," the boy replied with a frown.

"I see. In that case, you must be dealt with. Someone like you shouldn't be allowed to live."

"I get that a lot, honestly."

"Hey! I don't think you have the right to say that!" the girl exclaimed. Although the boy himself didn't seem to be especially bothered by his words, the anger in her expression showed that she felt far more strongly about it.

"Of course I do," Darian answered. "All living things are threatened by his ability, and all have a right to criticize him."

The girl said nothing more, but her expression didn't change. She didn't seem to have an argument of her own but was obviously not willing to accept his.

"I know it's a bit late for this, but I might as well ask," Darian continued. "Do you have any intention of committing suicide?"

"You're right. It's kind of late for that. If I was going to kill myself, I

would have done it a long time ago."

"Of course."

"And I'll say it again: if you leave us alone, I have no intention of hurting you. Then again, I guess I kind of have already."

The boy's face was conflicted. He seemed exasperated and bored but not the least bit nervous. Whatever Darian might do, his opponent seemed fully confident that he could handle it.

"I've concluded that I cannot allow you to live any longer."

"I get where you're coming from. If I met someone like me, I probably wouldn't let them live either."

"You seem awfully composed. Are you so sure you can't be killed?"

"I don't consider myself invincible. If you're stronger than me, I'll die, right?"

"I see. Then perhaps it wasn't coincidence that the two of us met. It seems to be the will of heaven that I put a stop to you."

The boy was unprepared. He claimed not to think himself invincible, but he had no concerns about losing. It gave Darian an idea of what to do. He was sure that he could win.

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The prince stopped time. Technically, that wasn't exactly what was happening, but it appeared that way from his perspective. Of course Darian himself could still move. The air around him moved enough to allow him to breathe, and he could touch anything he liked to allow it to move as well.

An ability to kill with a single thought was a considerable threat, but if the power relied on the boy's conscious choice to activate it, the solution was clear: offer no chance for it to be activated. Kill him before he realized that he was about to be killed.

Darian's companions had been killed just as they'd made the decision to attack, so the boy likely had some sort of ability to predict such things. But if time was stopped, such a power became irrelevant. Darian's ability to do just that was enough to resolve almost any situation he found himself in. But as convenient as it was, it did have its weaknesses. While time was frozen, he couldn't use any of his other skills or magic. Anything he threw would freeze moments after leaving his hand. So if he wanted to defeat someone in that

state, he had to approach and attack them directly.

Darian walked around behind the boy. With time halted, his adversary wouldn't be able to see him anyway, but he figured it was best to use extreme caution. Stepping close enough for his sword to reach, he paused. From his perspective, the boy was trapped in time. There should have been no brain function. He shouldn't have been able to perceive any killing intent and therefore shouldn't have been able to react to an attack. If any issue arose, it would be because his enemy was resilient enough to survive a strike from a blade.

Darian's earlier inspection had found no traces of any magical items, skills or other such effects on the boy. He appeared to be an ordinary human, meaning a single slash would be enough to cut him down. That much was a certainty.

Even so, he continued to consider whether he had overlooked anything. Stopping time consumed an enormous amount of magical energy, but he could maintain that state for about an hour. There was no need to rush. He considered everything carefully, ensuring that there were absolutely no holes in his plan.

And then a thought occurred to him. Was it really acceptable to kill him? Using such a power, or even having a chance to study it, could be of great help to his plan to save humanity.

He immediately discarded the thought. This boy was an enemy of humankind, one whose very existence threatened them all. Letting him live for even a second longer was too dangerous. He would deliver a blow to the head, swiftly ending his life. There wouldn't be the slightest opening for a counterattack. That would put an end to his Instant Death power.

Still, he wasn't used to the idea of striking a defenseless opponent. He hesitated briefly but soon pictured the result in his mind: he would slice the head from the top right diagonally downwards, then again from the top left. He would follow with a horizontal slash through the skull, and then finally a single straight slash from the top of the head down through the body to the groin. Although the first attack would likely kill him, he would take no chances.

Darian drew his sword.

Then their eyes met.

"Huh?"

With no warning, eyes had appeared. In the space between Darian and the boy, they began to open up in front of him. They weren't just eyeballs but full eyes, furnished with eyelids and set as if within a face.

A chill ran through him as the eyes continued to appear one after another. It was hard to tell how much time had passed while everything was frozen, but in what seemed like the briefest of instants, the space around him was filled with eyes in numbers beyond counting.

Eyes.

Eyes.

Eyes.

Each and every one of them was staring fixedly at him, watching. As Darian began to tremble in fear, the pupils moved, tracing his faint movements, observing every minute detail.

Even so, Darian raised his sword. The eyes followed the tip of the blade as it cut upwards through the air. They were watching him carefully. What would happen if he tried to bring the sword down? There was no way they would allow it. He was certain they would strike back at him somehow.

This was the line. If he turned his sword even slightly towards the boy, he would be killed. He was absolutely sure of it. And he realized that if he were killed, it wouldn't be something as simple as death waiting for him. It would be far worse.

He finally comprehended the bizarre situation he was in. The eyes were more than enough to clarify the danger, forcing him to understand. Their gazes bore into him, compelling him to grasp what was happening.

And then he realized something else. The nature of the boy had nothing to do with the flesh and blood standing before him. Even if he were to pound the stranger's skull to dust, his true self wouldn't suffer so much as a scratch. This was a being beyond human understanding, against whom resistance barely passed as a joke, whose enormity could only be recognized as absurdity. A monster.

Why...why is that thing pretending to be human?! And why here?!

This was a being he should have never come into contact with, but that was a fact one could not understand until contact was made. It was like a bad prank thought up by a truly wicked person.

There was nothing he could do.

Darian released his power, letting time flow again.

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Hearing a sound behind him, Yogiri turned around.

“Huh? What happened?” Tomochika murmured, surprised by the mysterious development.

It doesn’t appear to be the vanishing technique. As a member of the Dannoura family, I would have seen it.

Darian had been standing before them just a moment before, but now he was behind Yogiri. He had fallen to his knees, head bowed as if he didn’t have the strength to stand.

“Lord Darian!”

The Invincible Battalion was shocked. No one seemed to process what they were witnessing.

“I’ll say it one more time. Please leave. That’s all I want.”

Darian slowly lifted his head, the exhaustion in his face making him look like an entirely different person. “What...are you?”

“I don’t really have an answer to that except that I’m a normal high school student.”

Darian began to laugh hysterically as he lifted a finger to the side of his head.

“Hey, what are you—”

Getting a bad feeling about it, Yogiri tried to stop him. But what could he have done to prevent it? With a loud bang, the prince’s head exploded. His body flopped forward onto the ground, prompting the Invincible Battalion to turn and flee.

“What?! Why did he do that?!” cried Tomochika.

Aren’t you going to make a comment like, “Oh please, as if you’re just a high school student!” or something?

“Of course not!”

“I really wanted to avoid that,” muttered Yogiri.

It was hardly the desired result, but they had technically gotten what they’d asked for, so things had more or less worked out in the end.

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The impact of dying had left Darian in a state of shock. It was normal. His senses were always in a state of chaos afterwards, like the inside of his head had been scrambled. His vision was filled with wildly vivid colors, his hearing overwhelmed by white noise. A nauseating smell assaulted his nose, and it felt like something was seeping into his body through each and every pore. The feeling of drowning in this chaotic mess was a side effect of traveling through time.

What was that?

He had no idea what he had just seen. But now that he knew such a being existed, it didn't matter. All he had to do was avoid it next time. It wasn't something any human could hope to challenge. He knew that no matter how many times he tried, he would always lose.

His churning senses finally settled, and he found himself back in bed. It was night. If he had to go back and do things over, this was the best time to re-emerge. He had until morning to consider the situation that had caused his death, thereby minimizing his own disorder and reducing the chance that others would notice.

Darian opened his eyes. First he needed to know how far back he'd gone.

And then their eyes met.

Darian screamed, sparing no thought for appearances. He should have escaped, but still he was being watched by countless eyes.

"No, that's wrong! This time should have been before I ever met him!"

He suddenly realized something. Rather, he was forced to notice. He had indeed returned to the past, but the eyes were still there. That could mean only one thing: those eyes had existed everywhere, right from the start.

Whether it was a curse or some kind of corruption, he always maintained his memories when he traveled to the past, and now that he had noticed those eyes, he could never unsee them. No matter how far back he traveled, he would still know they were there.

There was nowhere he could run.

Darian's sanity didn't last for much longer.

Chapter 8 — Once a Trash NEET, Always a Trash NEET, Even after Being Reincarnated

Jolt and the rest of the battalion fled for their lives. Their terror was so deep that they had no room to even consider the horses under them.

The boy probably wouldn't attack them, so there was no real need to run so far so fast. But while they understood that, they couldn't bear to stay in that place. Not only was Darian dead, but he had killed himself. They didn't know what had happened but understood enough to recognize that it wasn't normal. They didn't have the composure to sit around and wait to be told to leave again.

"What was that?! Why did Lord Darian do that?!"

"I heard something once! I heard that when Lord Darian is on the verge of death, he can move back through time!"

"Th-Then he's going to come back to save us, right?!"

"That's right. Right, Jolt?!"

Everyone looked to their vice-captain. Although each of them had unbelievable powers of their own, they had relied on Darian for too long. It didn't even occur to them to use their own abilities.

"No, that's not what Lord Darian's power is."

It was only speculation based on what Jolt had heard and witnessed so far, but Darian's ability to go back in time only activated *after* his death, so it served as a final desperate gambit. It was something like sending his soul back in time, so whatever changes he made back then wouldn't affect the present, as if he were branching off into an entirely different timeline. Darian himself would be able to do things over, but that wouldn't help the rest of them now.

In short, their leader had abandoned them to save himself.

"No matter what Lord Darian does in the past, it won't affect us

anymore!" he continued.

"Then what are we supposed to do?!"

How am I supposed to know?! Jolt screamed internally. How could things have ended up this way? His second life had been going so well. As long as he was at Darian's side, there should have been nothing to fear. But now the prince was dead. Everything had fallen apart in an instant.

Before meeting Darian, Jolt hadn't been so dependent. Back then, he had used the advantages created by his past memories to aim to be the strongest. But now that he knew what stood above him, there was no way he could simple-mindedly follow that way of life again. He knew there was a level of ability beyond that which hard work could ever reach—an incarnation of terror that exceeded all understanding.

All things considered, it would be best to accept his place in the scheme of things and live according to his means, but that had also turned out to be impossible. In the end, Jolt hadn't changed at all. His childish nature of only being satisfied if he was at the very top hadn't improved a bit since being reincarnated. It had only been exacerbated by the supernatural powers this world had given him.

"It's okay! We're still the Invincible Battalion! As long as we have the armor Lord Darian made for us, we're invincible!"

"But that kid..."

"Who cares about him?! Ignore him! We just need to leave him alone!"

It sounded too good to be true, but that idea quickly began to win over the other members of the battalion. Even without Darian, they could continue to work together.

Before long they reached the capital and immediately realized that something was wrong. Something was happening. There was an unreasonably large crowd gathered around the city gates. That was strange enough on its own, but to make matters worse, the crowd was in a state of chaos. Roars, screams, wails. Numerous pained voices filled the air as the people fled.

"What's going on?"

They had been unaware of the events that had taken place in the city. They hadn't heard about the resurrection of the Dark God Mana or the sea of flesh that had spread through the capital, so they had no way of knowing that this scene was the harbinger of yet more despair. They had been running

desperately for their lives, with no idea that they had fled straight into another nightmare.

"What do we do now, Jolt?!"

"Why are you asking me?!"

"Because you're the vice-captain!"

Although they pressed him for an answer, Jolt was as clueless as his companions. They decided to approach the gates to see what was going on.

It appeared in front of them without a sound. Without any warning, an enormous, four-legged beast suddenly stood before them. It was a wolf, drenched so thoroughly in blood that its fur might have been naturally red. Between its enormous teeth were a number of people, some dead, some still moaning in pain. It's jaws continued to work up and down, paying them no mind, chewing and swallowing.

The battalion was struck by sheer terror. The strength of the wolf didn't matter, nor did the question of whether or not they could defeat it. Simply seeing something eating their fellow humans instilled absolute fear in them.

"Keep a hold of yourselves! We're invincible!" Jolt roared, attempting to encourage himself as much as the others. "Monster or not, it's just an animal! There is nothing for us to fear!"

The beast was so large that they had to look up at it. It was undoubtedly stronger than a human. But it was still just a wolf. Each member of the battalion had powers that defied belief, and they still had the invincible armor as well. No animal could be a threat to them.

But why had it appeared here? There didn't seem to be any particular reason for it. It was just a wolf, devouring anything it laid eyes on. Having finished what was in its mouth, it seemed to disappear.

Jolt turned around. He couldn't follow its movements, but the smell of blood and beast was impossible to hide, indicating its position clearly enough. As expected, it had moved behind them.

Then one of the soldiers vanished. Iris had been snatched up, horse and all.

"I-I'm okay! It doesn't hurt! Its fangs can't break through the armor! Everyone, get it now!"

The monster's speed was hard to believe, but its fangs were ineffective against their comrade. If they could defend against its attacks, they had plenty of ways to fight it.

“Leave it to us! I’ll show this mutt what it means to fear the Invincible—”

Iris abruptly disappeared. She had been swallowed whole. Impenetrable armor didn’t mean much under those circumstances. Even Darian had likely never predicted such an attack.

“She’s...fine, right? She’s probably still alive inside it!”

If she struggled from within, the monstrous creature surely wouldn’t last long. But so far it seemed unharmed. There was no sign of movement from within its belly, and no sword punched out from inside.

“The Wolf King,” someone murmured.

It was the name of an Aggressor. An incarnation of atrocity, perpetually starving, forever devouring everything in reach. It was a beast that had stayed hidden ever since Sage Lain had repelled it.

Jolt was reminded of why the city was surrounded by such a powerful wall, why they had allowed a group as self-serving as the Sages to do whatever they wanted. It was all because of these Aggressors. It was to protect their people from these very nightmares.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Normally, even if there had been casualties, a Sage would immediately appear to resolve the situation. But there was no Sage here now.

Jolt had no way of knowing it, but the Sage who had lived there was dead. Darian had said that half-demons were necessary to keep something sealed away, but if one of those seals broke and something was revived now, the destruction it would cause likely wouldn’t make a difference.

Before anyone had even realized it, the balance of the world had begun to collapse.

“Why... Why is this happening?” Jolt murmured.

The Wolf King approached slowly, having chosen him as its next target. Jolt closed his eyes. He couldn’t bear the fear of watching those jaws creeping ever closer. Trembling, he waited for that final moment. But it never came. A warm breath, heavy with the scent of meat and blood, blew slowly past him. The Wolf King was right beside him now.

“If you’re going to eat me, just hurry up and do it!” he cried, eyes still shut tight. But the Wolf King made no reply.

Finally, the fear of what he couldn’t see got the better of him, and Jolt pried his eyes open. When he did, he saw two identical young girls standing in front of him. He went rigid at the unexpected sight. The Wolf King stood

behind them but was as solid as a statue.

"You are..."

"I'm Malna!"

"I'm Rilna!"

"Together we're Malnarilna! Yay!"

As they spoke, the girls clapped their hands together.

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Jolt was in shock. The atmosphere had changed so drastically that the terrifying scene from a moment before felt like a lie. He realized that he couldn't smell the beast's breath anymore. It was as if time had simply stopped.

"Now then, do you know my name, Jolt?"

"My name counts too!"

"The Malnarilna Sect." It was the name of one of the largest religions in the world, second only to the Axis Church.

"Worshiping a big pole like the Axis Church doesn't count, though! So really, we're the biggest religion!"

"That's right! We're gods!"

Jolt had never heard of Malnarilna being two separate beings, let alone young girls.

"We're gods, so we can make time go reeeaaally slow!"

"Coming here without the cute little wolfie noticing is easy!"

He found it hard to accept that they were actually gods, but if they were the ones who had stopped time, their strength must have been the real deal.

"If you're gods... If you can do this...couldn't you have saved these people?!"

"What? Aren't most of the people in Manii members of the Axis Church?"

"Why would we save *them*?"

Hearing it put that way, it was hard to argue the point. But it made their presence even more baffling.

"We're just here to tell you what's up."

"We're the reason you were reincarnated."

"Darian was the same, by the way."

"You were hopeless trash in your last life, but we wanted to see if you'd turn out better if we gave you a second chance."

"I thought you'd stay the same."

"I guess you win, Rilna. Conclusion: once a trash NEET, always a trash NEET! Even after reincarnating!"

"Darian was so serious, he was no fun to watch at all."

"It would have been more exciting if he'd tried to fight the Sages."

"Why did he agree to work with them?"

"Why did he try to be some kind of hero?"

“Well, we’re just spectators anyway.”

“No matter what you guys do, we’re only here to watch.”

Jolt was overwhelmed by the rapid-fire conversation. Unable to keep up, he merely stared at them, bewildered. “Then why did you show up now?!”

“You’re gonna die in a second, so we wanted to ask you something first.”

“How was it? Was living as a garbage human fun?”

“How does it feel to learn you’ve been dancing in the palm of a god this whole time?”

The girls peered into his face. Jolt didn’t know what sort of expression he was wearing at the moment, but he was sure he looked like a complete idiot given how confused the conversation had left him.

“C-Can’t you save me?” he begged. If they were gods, they could surely have done something.

“Sorry, that’s not what we’re doing this time.”

“This time is just about carefully, carefully, caaarefully watching the life of a piece of trash.”

“Wh-What do you want from me?! How can you play with people’s lives like this?! Stop messing with me!”

“We thought it would be fun.”

“But it wasn’t, so we’re done.”

As if they had suddenly lost interest, the pair turned around and walked away.

“So what’s next?”

“How about that kid from earlier? I hear he can kill people just by thinking it.”

“What is that? How does that even work?”

Malnarilna disappeared, and time began to move again.

In front of Jolt the open jaws of the Wolf King snapped shut. He couldn’t help but panic as he felt himself being swallowed, but at that point, death almost seemed like a gift.

Chapter 9 — My Apologies, It Seems He Got a Little Hungry

David was a vice-captain for the city guard, responsible for guarding the southern gate of the capital. Their duties included keeping order on the southern side of the city as well as managing the area just outside the gates.

So guiding the people who were milling around the gate was part of his responsibility. However, with the city drowning in a sea of meat and most of the citizens dead, what could they do for the few survivors who had barely escaped with their lives? This was far more than what a city guard was prepared to handle.

But David didn't run. Even though he held the lowest possible rank within the royal family, he still maintained his pride as a member of that household. Only a tiny fraction of the capital's population seemed to have survived, but the original number was so large that even the comparatively small number of those who had been close enough to the walls to escape defied counting. Most of them were in a daze, with nothing left but the clothes on their backs.

Recognizing how dire the situation was, David headed for a nearby town. They couldn't flood the smaller town with people without giving them warning, so he went alone first to negotiate.

He asked for accommodations for the refugees, or if that was impossible, some emergency camping equipment and food. His requests were accepted surprisingly easily. It helped that the town was a wealthy one, although having been introduced by Third Prince Richard was also a great boon.

After parting ways with Yogiri, David had managed to meet up with Richard, who had been in the palace but had escaped through the rooftop after finding that he was unable to fight back against the tide of flesh. Now he too was visiting another settlement, performing negotiations just as David was.

"Well, that's all well and good, but now what?" David grumbled on his way back to the city.

By mobilizing the surrounding settlements, they should have just been able to handle the survivors. But the ever prosperous capital of Manii was no more. One could not deny that its destruction was a crippling blow to the nation. It wasn't hard to imagine some other countries taking advantage of the situation and moving against them.

The nearby Empire of Arganda was already in the process of swallowing up the countries around it. It was only a matter of time before they set their gazes on Manii as well.

Wasn't stopping the Argandans from invading one of the great feats that the Sage candidates were supposed to accomplish? he mused.

Now that the Sage Sion was dead, it was doubtful that those great feats would ever be accomplished, but it did make him wonder about how the empire would react to their current situation. And now that the Underworld was gone, they would no longer be receiving financial support from other nations to keep it suppressed. Compared to its size, the amount of practically usable land in the Kingdom of Manii was surprisingly small. It had managed to prosper thanks to the support provided by their neighbors in exchange for keeping the Underworld under control. Either way, the future of their kingdom was looking dark.

As David mulled this over, the sound of screaming pulled him from his reverie, and he lifted his head to take in a sight that made him doubt his own eyes. Although he was still a distance away, he could see that an enormous wolf was attacking people near the city gate.

"Is that...an Aggressor?!"

The capital had been protected by the Sage Santarou, powerful walls that had been built by the ancient High Wizard, and the sealing power of the royal family. There was little for the people of the capital to fear from the Aggressors. But now the Sage was dead, the walls had crumbled, and the royal family had been considerably weakened. They should have been on their guard, but it seemed like his people had completely forgotten about the existence of the Aggressors.

David knew the second he laid eyes on the wolf that none of them stood any chance against such a beast. Nothing they did would matter. Even if he tried to distract the creature long enough for a single person to escape, it likely wouldn't pay him any attention. It would simply continue to devour people, feeding its insatiable hunger.

The next thought was for him to escape on his own, but that would also have been impossible. Naturally, refugees were scattering like flies, but the wolf merely appeared in front of them as they ran. It moved so fast that it might as well have been teleporting, and it was prioritizing those who were trying to run away. It was also aware of David—in fact, it was fully aware of every bit of prey in the area.

"I suppose I should have stayed with Yogiri after all," David said, drawing his sword.

There was no way he could win, but that didn't mean he could sit around and do nothing. He looked for an area on the creature's body where he might be able to injure it. The eyes seemed like a good option, but the wolf was so tall that he probably couldn't reach them. The inside of its mouth seemed similarly vulnerable, but if he was close enough to attack, he would quickly be crushed by the creature's jaws.

"Huh, what about striking between its claws?"

He didn't know if it would make any difference, but at this point it was all he could think of. With a roar, he charged the beast. It was already aware of him, so there was no point in trying to sneak up on it. It made more sense to get his own adrenaline going.

"Get down!"

David reacted immediately to the shout that came from behind him. Abandoning his sword, he threw himself headfirst to the ground as something passed through the air overhead. He looked up and saw that the wolf was growling, turning to face him. Spitting out the bodies in its mouth, it was taking a battle-ready stance.

"Are you okay?!"

"Yes, though I wouldn't have been for long," David replied, climbing back to his feet.

Standing beside him was Richard—the current Swordmaster and third prince of Manii—with his sword drawn.

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“Was that shock wave from your sword?”

“Yes, that’s what happens when I swing the Holy Sword.”

“Do you think you can handle this thing? As frustrating as it is to admit it, I don’t think I can do much here.”

“It appears to have identified me as a threat. Can you help the others to escape while I hold its attention?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

If Richard could keep the wolf at bay, they might have a chance. David stepped forward, ignoring the monster. He had no way of beating it himself. But curling up in fear would get him killed regardless, so he went with defiance instead.

Richard managed to keep the wolf in check, preventing it from attacking. It growled as it adjusted its footing but nothing more. While the beast was distracted, David gathered the survivors. There weren’t many left, but he tried to tell himself that any number was better than zero. He slowly led them around behind Richard.

“Oh my, looks like Fido is scared,” a woman’s voice called out from the direction of the wolf.

David looked up to see that a woman with long hair had suddenly appeared there, sitting on the animal’s head.

“Its name is Fido?” Richard replied dumbly.

“No? It’s like, treating your underlings like pet dogs. It’s just an expression.”

“Did you order it to do this?” Richard had apparently decided that this woman was the wolf’s owner.

“I’m not quite sure what you mean by ‘this,’ but I guess I get what you’re trying to say. I’m sorry, it seems he got a little hungry.”

She clapped her hands together in apology. It was certainly a situation that called for her to apologize, but her flippant attitude didn’t match the gravity of the moment at all.

“Really, this is just an excuse, so feel free not to believe me, but this little guy and I got separated after coming to this world. And when I’m not around, he makes a real mess, doesn’t he? I’m always telling him to cut it out, so I bet he gets real stressed about it. When I’m not around, he must feel like he’s finally free to eat as much as he likes.”

“I honestly don’t understand what you’re trying to say, but is it safe to

assume you will not allow it to continue its rampage?”

The damage was already immense. There weren’t enough words to describe how he felt, but Richard swallowed his complaints. Regaining control of things was his top priority.

“Of course. Letting him eat anything he wants will spoil him rotten.”

“In that case, I would like to ask you two to leave.”

“I don’t mind much, but there’s a reason we’re here. Actually, me finding him here was mostly a coincidence.”

“And what is your reason for coming?”

“We sensed the presence of a god. Seems like it’s coming from that big pile of meat. My little guy here noticed it and came running. So I decided to come take a look myself.”

David recalled the form that the mass of meat had taken earlier. The figure he had observed from the Archbishop’s office had been beautiful enough to make the classification of “goddess” seem fitting.

“But this doesn’t seem to be what we’re looking for. Ah, I guess I should at least ask. We’re searching for a goddess. Have you seen any around?”

“A goddess? I’ve encountered one named Vahanato, but...”

“What? She’s here?! I was wondering why I hadn’t run into her for a while. But that’s not who I’m looking for. Thanks for letting me know, though.”

The woman lightly tapped the head of the wolf, and in an instant they were gone, the beast running off at a terrifying speed.

“I guess we’re saved?” asked David.

“For now. But clearly we can’t afford to stay here for long. The Aggressors are being drawn to that ocean of meat.”

Even if they didn’t already have a reason to get moving, they couldn’t wait around and do nothing, so they decided to head on to one of the nearby towns.

Chapter 10 — Interlude: They're Somewhat Lacking in Communication Skills

When Haruto Ootori awoke, he found himself floating in some sort of solution. His first reaction was to panic and swim up towards the surface, but he immediately hit the ceiling. He was in an airtight space, filled entirely with liquid.

Haruto was quickly gripped by an overpowering fear of drowning, but as time passed, he realized that he wasn't suffocating. Thinking about it, he realized that if he had been sleeping in this liquid, it obviously wasn't a danger to him.

Calming down, he took in his situation. He was in some sort of transparent, cylindrical tube. Looking out from his enclosure, he saw numerous other tubes. A glance down at himself told him that he was naked and, more importantly, uninjured.

He should have been covered in wounds. His entire body had been charred and on the edge of death, but he had been completely healed. Perhaps the tube was some sort of medical device. He realized then that despite not wearing his glasses, he was able to see everything around him clearly. Haruto suffered from extreme shortsightedness, but that had clearly been healed as well.

What is going on?

Struggling pointlessly wouldn't help him, so he tried to remember what had brought him there. Luckily, as a Consultant, he had the Problem Resolution skill—the power to access all records of what had happened in this world and identify any information he desired. Learning what had been done to him should have been easy.

In the middle of his class's battle royale in the Underworld, some sort of flesh had begun to pour out from the depths below them. Haruto had avoided

it with his natural ability to fly—he was a type of beastkin that mixed human traits with those of birds. Realizing that something was wrong, he had flown up into the air and attempted to flee the Underworld. Upon nearing the surface, he'd been caught up in something that had injured him severely, after which his memories were vague. And that was where his Gift would come into play.

But when he went to use the Problem Resolution skill, he became confused. The system menu was gone.

No way. Was that removed during the healing process?

The ability he had come to fully rely on was missing. He was overcome by an anxiety the likes of which he had never felt before.

With a gurgle, the liquid in his tube began to drain. As he was lowered to the bottom of the container, he landed on his feet and then dropped to his knees. The muscles in his legs were weak, so he had difficulty standing.

Once the liquid had fully drained, the tube lifted up and away from him.

So I'm free to go?

Struggling to his feet, Haruto began to walk unsteadily.

"So you've finally awoken, Haruto Ootori."

Having appeared out of nowhere, a slender man in a black suit was suddenly standing before him. When Haruto tried to reply, he instead vomited the liquid that was still sitting in his lungs.

"Please don't push yourself. We really don't need to use words in the first place, but after all the effort I went through to learn Japanese, I wanted to try speaking it."

"May I ask who you are?" Haruto replied, trying to sound polite. With no idea what his current situation was, he decided it was best to be careful.

"I'm a god. My personal name is Zakuro. At least, that's the closest word I can find that matches your language's linguistic structure. I'm not trying to play myself off as some higher being or look down on you or anything. You can just think of me as someone who's very powerful. That's the best way to look at it."

In spite of the stranger's words, it wasn't easy to believe that he was a god. The man looked like nothing more than a human male, and there were no obvious signs of him being particularly powerful either.

"Where are we?"

"This is my ship. We're currently traveling through subspace."

“Why am I here?”

“My subordinates brought you. You were suffering from some fairly bad burns, to the point where it didn’t look like you were going to make it, so I healed you.”

It seemed like the stranger had saved him, but Haruto couldn’t figure out why someone calling himself a god would bother to help.

“Don’t overthink it,” Zakuro said as if answering his suspicions. “Someone was about to die, and I had the ability to save them without much cost to myself, so why shouldn’t I?”

Haruto decided to accept the explanation for the time being. Of course, if he had been saved on a whim, he could be thrown away just as easily. He would need to be on guard against that.

“What will happen to me now?”

“I don’t mean to act as if you owe me anything, but could you help me? My subordinates haven’t been very useful, so I’ve been having a bit of trouble lately.”

“I’m not sure what I could possibly do for you.”

“My subordinates are somewhat lacking in communication skills. They’re just not very good at searching for things.”

“You’re asking me to look for something?”

“The version of Battle Song that was installed in you was an older one, with some original modifications done to it.” He must have inspected Haruto quite thoroughly. That would explain how he had known his name as well. “The version you had was close to the version that was given out when our lord went missing. There’s a possibility that our lord is the one who first brought Battle Song to this world. I guess that’s a bit of a stretch, but either way, I’d like you to look into it.”

“Are you unable to do it yourself? You seem more than able to communicate.”

“I’d love to, but if I go there, I’ll have a strong effect on that world, so it’s not that easy. If I do end up going, it’ll only be after I’m absolutely sure that I’ll find what I’m looking for.” If neither he nor his subordinates could go, sending Haruto made sense as the next best option.

“Is this lord the person you would like me to find?”

“Yes, but I can’t tell you anything more unless you agree to work with me. Feel free to take your time and think about it. For now, I’ll send you back

to where we picked you up."

Haruto was surprised. After Zakuro had gone through all the effort of retrieving and healing him, he hadn't expected to have the option of refusing.

"I'm a bit of a stickler when it comes to free will," Zakuro explained. "Forcing people to do things is too much work. Thanks to that rule, I won't even force my subordinates to learn the language of this world." He tossed something to Haruto, who snatched it out of the air. It looked like a small pill. "Sorry, but the modified Battle Song you had inside you was detected as a virus by the healing system and subsequently erased. This is a replacement. If you swallow that, it'll install the newest version of the client."

Once again, he seemed to be leaving the decision to Haruto.

"After you've had some time to calm down, I'll send my subordinates to get you. Please let me know your answer then."

The man promptly disappeared along with the floor. Everything around him vanished in an instant, and suddenly Haruto was accelerating at a terrifying rate, the wind howling in his ears. He had just been thrown out into the sky.

"Shit!"

He manifested his wings and caught the air, managing to enter a controlled descent. Although it had taken him by surprise, he managed to catch himself before it was too late. If he had panicked, he would have crashed straight into the ground.

Now descending slowly, he could see the capital. It was a bizarre sight. The entire city was buried under dark red meat.

Did all that come from the Underworld?

The flesh was motionless, so it was possible that it was dead, but regardless, it seemed the capital wouldn't be of much use to him anymore. He decided to land in a forest near the city instead.

"What do I do now?"

Haruto was still naked. The only thing he had on him was the pill that Zakuro had given him. As he contemplated the issue of acquiring new clothes, he began to feel a little helpless.

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Chapter 11 — Who Even Wants Fanservice Like This?!

“You’re going to be a hero, Ragna? Are you joking?” Ragna’s father, Rask, shouted. There was certainly anger in his voice, but it was hard to say whether he was actually upset or not. That was just the way he spoke.

“Yes, well, his current class is Villager, and it is quite common for those like villagers and peasants to suddenly change classes and become heroes,” Hanakawa mumbled.

“The hell is a ‘class’? You making fun of me?”

Ragna felt a bit discouraged. He was planning to leave the village and embark on an adventure, just like in the old stories. They were there to ask for Rask’s permission, but Hanakawa was acting rather weak.

At the moment, they were in Ragna’s house, with Ragna and Hanakawa sitting across the table from Rask.

“And anyway, how do you expect Ragna, who can barely hunt a lizard, to make it as a hero? Talk to me when he can catch a deer or a rabbit.”

“Uhh, are deer and rabbits some sort of euphemism?”

“A deer is a deer, a rabbit is a rabbit!” Rask shouted angrily, causing Hanakawa to recoil.

One might have expected Ragna to be able to hunt ordinary woodland animals like deer and rabbits without much difficulty, but without permission, he couldn’t enter the deeper parts of the forest where they lived.

“Err, actually, I have the ability to gauge the strength of others, and Sir Ragna here is quite powerful in my estimation. Even the class of Hero may not be good enough for him.”

Hanakawa was clearly afraid of Rask. Ragna could well understand his feelings. His father’s face was scary, he was always overbearing in his speech, and he was built quite large, giving him an overwhelming presence.

But that was a problem. If Ragna said himself that he wanted to leave the village, his father would dismiss him. He needed the help of a third party,

someone who could persuade Rask.

Ragna had been wanting to leave the village for a long time, but he could never up and leave on a whim. Unless he took advantage of a chance like this, he might never be able to leave. At this rate, he would grow old and die in the village without accomplishing anything. That tedious future, spending every day like the last, should have been enough to snuff out what little adventurous spirit he might have tried to kindle.

But then *he* had arrived. He'd said that Ragna was the hero of a prophecy and invited him to go on a journey to save the world.

"What? How is this fool strong? If you can tell how strong people are, try checking me out."

"All right, then. Level 72,000. Honestly, what is going on with the people in this village?"

Perhaps because of his anger, something like steam started pouring from Rask's body. "Looks like you can tell that I'm much stronger. What's some dumb brat who's weaker than me going to do for you?!"

Ragna had wondered the same thing. Why him? There were plenty of stronger people in the village. If you were going to invite someone to go on an adventure, there were many others who would be more helpful. And it was already strange for someone to be looking for a hero in a remote, boring village like theirs.

"Well, you see, how do I put it? Ah! Future prospects and potential for growth! That's why he was chosen, I guess? That's how it seems to me..." It was clear that Hanakawa didn't believe what he was saying. It sounded like nothing more than a half-hearted excuse.

"Do you really think he has any of that? If you want someone with potential, why not Joni from across the river? He's younger than Ragna but better at hunting."

"Err, well, Ragna has a cuter face...I guess?"

"You're making fun of me because I'm just some country bumpkin, aren't you?! I'm not buying any of this! Ragna, you're a fool for letting yourself be talked up by this guy! There's no way you're leaving the village!"

Ragna turned a bitter expression towards Hanakawa. These nonsensical excuses would never convince his father.

Unexpectedly buckling under the pressure, Hanakawa continued to mutter his displeasure. "Ugh... I never thought I'd have to put up with this blunt

abuse from such a scary-looking man. I'd much prefer it came from a female drill sergeant or something..."

But Rask had already been turned off by the idea. At this point, there was no hope of him changing his mind regardless of what they did.

Is my adventure really going to end here? Before it has even started?

"We need Ragna's power to save the world, Father."

As Ragna felt himself sinking into despair, a woman's voice called out. At some point, Rei Kushima had stepped into the room.

"What?! Who the hell are you?!" Rask shouted.

Paying his blustering no mind, Rei stepped up and put a hand on his shoulder. The moment she did, his attitude changed completely.

"The world, huh? In that case...I guess we have no choice. But why my son?"

"Because of the prophecy. It was predicted that Ragna would be the one to save the world."

"A prophecy, huh? Well, in that case, it must be true. I guess you have no choice but to go..."

"That's right." She turned to Ragna. "So now that we have your father's permission, shall we go?"

"Huh?" Ragna was baffled by the sudden change. Despite the previous outburst, his father's opinion had drastically changed in an instant.

Still, in spite of the strangeness of it, the moment Rei took his arm, he didn't care anymore. He could leave the village with a smile on his face and a big wave back, so he felt that such minor details were unimportant.

"If you can convince him that easily, why did you have me struggle so hard to do it on my own?" Hanakawa whined.

"Because it was funny?" Rei replied. "Oh, don't worry about it, Ragna. This was all training to help Hanakawa cultivate his spirit."

"Oh, okay. You did well, then, facing off against someone like my father."

Rei pulled Ragna out of the house. Akinobu Marufuji and Shigehito Mitadera were waiting outside.

"We got permission. Okay, let's head to the old Demon Lord's castle, then to the island nation of Ent in the east. We'll be counting on you, Leader," Shigehito said, patting Ragna on the shoulder.

"Wait, I'm the leader?"

“That’s right. We’re all relying on you,” Akinobu agreed. It seemed they had previously agreed that Ragna would lead their party.

The sudden responsibility was too much for him. But the moment he started to doubt himself, Rei’s words made him feel like maybe he could do it after all.

“We need you to lead us. But don’t worry, we’ll all be here to support you.”

“All right. By the way, what are we doing in the Demon Lord’s castle and Ent?”

“We’re collecting materials to make the hero’s sword,” Shigehito said. “You’re okay for now, but at some point a normal sword won’t be able to bear your strength anymore. We need to make a new one—one designed specially for you.”

“A sword...just for me...”

A special weapon to be held by a hero. Those words were more than enough to fan the flames of his adventurous spirit and set his heart ablaze.

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At the old Demon Lord’s castle, the group acquired a material known as soulsteel. After that, they traveled to the east end of the continent where they boarded a boat, and after a few days they reached a port town in the country of Ent.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have fled back then. If I stayed with Yogiri, I might have gotten to hear all the girls chatting in a hot spring or something. And if circumstances permitted, I might have had the privilege of being a lucky pervert!”

In a room at the inn in the port town, Hanakawa was moaning as he curled up in the corner.

“You’re being annoying again, piggy,” Akinobu Marufuji said as he stepped into the room, already tired of Hanakawa’s behavior. No matter how many times he hurt Hanakawa, the guy never seemed to learn his lesson.

“M-My apologies!”

“We’re about to have a strategy meeting. Come on.”

“Huh? Is a swine like me permitted to join such an event?”

“How come even when you’re being self-deprecating, it feels like you’re

making fun of me? Whatever. We have Ragna to think about, so we can't just leave you out. You are technically one of our party members."

"Ah, so that's how it is. In that case, I will gladly accept your invitation."

Hanakawa had ultimately returned to his characteristic pattern of speech. His party members had given up on trying to change that about him, as if it was too much trouble to keep complaining about it.

Following Akinobu, Hanakawa joined the table. He, Shigehito, Akinobu, Rei, and Ragna made up the party of five.

"So we've reached Ent, the country in the east," Ragna said. "What should we do now?"

In spite of being their "leader," he had no idea what they were doing there. He was simply following Akinobu and the others.

"Well, as long as you follow my predictions, everything will go fine," Shigehito, the Master Oracle, said as he put a book on the table.

"What is that? It just looks like a strategy guide for some game," Hanakawa remarked.

"That's pretty accurate. It's like a strategy guide for this world."

"But to what end? I am unaware of your objective in this world in the first place..."

"If we don't do something about the Sages, we don't have a future. You know that the evil Sages are just doing whatever they like with this world, right, Ragna?"

"Are they? I heard they were protecting it."

"That's right," Rei said, clinging to Ragna in a way that emphasized her chest. "Ragna will defeat the evil Sages and save the world."

"All right, I understand. If I defeat the Sages, the world will be at peace!"

Okay, he is clearly being manipulated! Hanakawa declared silently. Rei's class was Femme Fatale. Her Gift gave her the ability to ensnare and lead men astray.

"I would think we could just ignore the Sages," Hanakawa continued out loud. "The three of you have incredible abilities, don't you? Why don't you just live however you see fit?"

"That won't work," Shigehito said, pushing the strategy guide towards him, inviting Hanakawa to read it himself.

To defeat the Sages, you need the World Sword Omega Blade! Your main

objective in Ent is to obtain the World Sword...but beware! The Sage Yoshifumi is also there! If you encounter him before obtaining the sword, you will be wiped out! However, unlike most Sages, Yoshifumi acts as the Emperor of Ent, so his area of movement is fairly restricted. If you are careful, you should be able to avoid him!

"Ha! World Sword Omega Blade? Are you serious?"

"Not that."

One point of advice: If you become too strong, you will be designated as a Rogue Sage and assassinated! You aren't strong enough to fight a Sage yet, so try to avoid anything that will make you stand out!

Hanakawa remembered his time with Aoi. Rogue Sages were those who were as powerful as Sages but refused to join their ranks. Aoi's job had been to hunt them down and kill them.

"There are an awful lot of exclamation marks in this book..." Hanakawa randomly noted.

"That's just how it is. Tomorrow we'll head to the capital and get the materials to make the Omega Blade," Akinobu said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Huh? What is it?"

"You have a very important role to play."

Akinobu was acting suspiciously nice.

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"Who even wants fanservice like this?!"

Hanakawa was naked. To be precise, he had his underwear on, but that was small consolation for him. Waving a white flag with all his might, he grudgingly trudged his way up to the fortress on top of the mountain.

Go straight to the front gate by yourself, without any weapons.

Those were Shigehito's instructions. Apparently the people manning the fort were required to accept visitors without violence, and getting in without violence was a prerequisite for obtaining the material they needed for the Omega Blade.

So Hanakawa was alone. The rest of the party was waiting a short distance away.

“Ugh. Why is this happening to me? They said I would be fine, but what’s the point if it’s not some hero with a super powerful weapon? I don’t lose any of my combat skills from being naked!”

He continued to grumble as he trudged forward. His three classmates had recruited him specifically for situations like this. He had thought their relationship was actually improving for a time, but it seemed that had been a misconception on his part.

The fortress that Hanakawa now approached was renowned for being impregnable. That made sense; from its position on the mountain, it offered a view of the landscape for miles around. Naturally, they would be immediately aware of some naked guy waving a white flag as he approached, and would therefore already be on guard.

“But that’s just how it goes. We need to enter the fortress without bloodshed, so at least there’s no risk of being attacked. In that case, this is quite a desirable event. In a sense, it is like I am conquering the fortress alone! That would mean in the end I’m like a hero myself, am I not?”

As he continued to delude himself during his climb up the mountain, he saw figures moving at the top of one of the lookout towers. A girl in a maid outfit was there, holding a large bow in her hands.

“Huh, that is starting to seem like an awfully common sight. How come everyone is making their maids fight? Still, I can’t say I’m at all opposed to it.”

As Hanakawa gave a vulgar chuckle, the girl nocked an arrow and drew it back. Like the bow, the arrow was enormous. It was hard to imagine she would be aiming at anything other than Hanakawa, since he was the only one in sight.

“Uhh... This is supposed to be without bloodshed, right? Are they just trying to threaten me? That must be it. If someone who looks like an enemy is approaching, it is only natural for them to be on guard. And then when they see me walking towards them with no clothes or weapons, they will be impressed by my boldness and so open the gate, allowing me—”

The tip of the arrow began to glow. It was clear that it wasn’t just a simple arrow. Once he realized that, Hanakawa jumped diagonally forward. The others had told him that he would be killed if he stopped or retreated, so this

was the only option open to him.

The arrow passed directly by him, causing him to stagger. Even without being struck, the gust of wind from its passage had thrown him off balance.

"You stopped?"

The voice whispering in his ear sent a chill down Hanakawa's spine. Although it had only been for a few seconds, he had come to a dead stop when he'd staggered.

"N-Not at all! It must be your imagination!"

A loud sound erupted behind him, throwing him forward. The arrow struck the ground and exploded. The blast threw him onto his face, but Hanakawa hurried back to his feet and began walking again.

"Damn." The mysterious voice sounded upset but nonetheless seemed to agree that he was following the rules.

"How am I supposed to do this without bloodshed?! If nothing else, *my* blood is certainly going to be spilled!"

He soon noticed that a second maid had taken up position beside the first. He wanted to hesitate but continued forward. He couldn't stop.

As he watched, more and more girls in maid outfits appeared. It looked like an entire army of them was gathering on the ramparts.

"I see, I see. I heard only that bandits had taken up residence in the fortress, but it appears to be a maid bandit troupe. Wait, is it really possible to expect a bloodless entry to a keep held by bandits?"

A bit late, he began to question his actions, but what happened next quickly chased the thoughts from his mind. As one, the maids drew their arrows and brought them to their bows. Just like before, the tips of their arrows began to glow. While it was an impressive sight, Hanakawa was hardly in a position to sit around and enjoy it.

"By the way, I was told if I stopped or turned back I would be killed, but how, exactly?"

"I'll explode in your ear."

"Then you'll die too!"

"That's why I was born. I don't care if I die."

Made by the Creator, Akinobu Marufuji, the creature accompanying him had no fear of death.

Facing the threat of countless arrows, Hanakawa couldn't stop. He had no choice but to continue approaching as slowly as possible. As he racked his

brain for a plan, he used his Discernment skill on the maids.

Class: Battle Maid.

Average level: Two hundred.

It was a well-rounded class that included hand-to-hand combat, weapon, and magic skills in addition to skills that a maid would normally require.

“I couldn’t even beat one of them! Wait! Perhaps one of the items I have... No, they took everything I had!”

Hanakawa possessed a skill that allowed him to store a huge number of items in an Item Box, but everything inside it had been stolen by Shigehito and the others.

“I need to calm down. There may still be some other option for me. Maybe I can dodge the arrows or survive the attack... No, it’s definitely impossible!”

Hanakawa was level ninety-nine, but since his class wasn’t specialized in close combat, his physical abilities were considerably limited. Although his healing ability was first class, there wouldn’t be anything left of him to heal if he got hit by one of those shafts. He could heal any wound no matter how severe as long as he was still alive, but if it killed him instantly, he was straight out of luck.

The other option was to fight back somehow, but he didn’t have any real way of doing so. He could use his magical bullets, but the strength and range they offered was close to that of a pistol. Not only would they fail to reach his targets from there, they wouldn’t do any appreciable damage to high-level warriors such as these.

“Really? Is it possible that I’m actually done for?”

If he ran away, his head would explode. If he continued forward, he would be pelted by multiple arrows, each strong enough to kill him with one shot.

“Looks like you’re screwed.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you! We’re sharing the same fate here!”

The thing living in his ear clearly didn’t fear death. It spoke as if it were talking about someone else’s problem entirely.

“Man... I just wanted to live my life as a lecherous old man. I thought since I had the appearance of a trash mob, I might be able to make that happen!”

“That’s disgusting.”

“I don’t need criticism from some weird creature!”

“I wish I could have been stuck inside someone a bit better than you.”

“If you’re going to sprout an ego, I’d rather you waited for a better time!”

“Looks like your feet have stopped.”

“So? I’m going to die no matter what I do—”

As he wasted time on a pointless conversation, the arrows were fired. They filled the sky, falling down on him like rain. With nowhere left to run, it seemed the worst possible fate had finally caught up to him.

“I-It’s just like Sir Polnareff’s situation, right? Those famous three choices! So the natural answer is that the handsome Hanakawa will suddenly have a flash of inspiration to turn the tide...or not! I guess reality really is cruel!”

He stopped moving, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. Would countless arrows punch him full of holes, or would one be enough to obliterate him? Or would his head explode before the arrows even reached him? With his eyes clamped shut, he waited for his final moments.

But nothing happened.

“Maybe I just didn’t notice and I’m already dead?”

He opened his eyes hesitantly. Standing in front of him was a young man —Ragna had come to protect him.

“Ohh! So it was option number two: ‘your companions appear to rescue you’! I didn’t think it was possible, so I didn’t even consider it!”

“I can’t just let them kill you,” Ragna said, swinging his sword lightly. With that one small movement, the rain of arrows was blown out of the sky. The army of maids fired again, but Ragna easily stopped them with his sword.

Hanakawa’s sudden relief reminded him that he hadn’t yet been killed despite having come to a stop.

“Uhh, I thought that if I stopped or retreated, I would be killed?”

“They said that if we’re nearby, it won’t explode,” Ragna explained, still covering him.

“Ohh, they even took precautions in case I charged back towards them! How thorough!”

Hanakawa of course hadn’t even considered such an option. Although he was frequently faced with situations that had forced him to face his own death, he always felt that as long as he was still alive, he had a chance to turn

things around.

"But at this rate, entering the fortress without bloodshed will be impossible, won't it?"

"Yeah. Apparently the chance of success was pretty low to start with."

"Pretty low?! Are you sure that it wasn't zero and they weren't just trying to get rid of me?!" It was likely that everything in Shigehito's book of prophecy was accurate, but that didn't mean he could trust his fellow student. "Then, Sir Ragna, I greatly appreciate you saving me, but what do we do now? We can't just stand here forever."

"That's true, but I'd feel bad about attacking them back. All they did was fire on a potential enemy."

"Ah, so I look so suspicious that it's okay to attack me?"

"I mean, you *are* marching towards them totally naked." Even Ragna, a naive village boy, thought his behavior questionable.

"I suppose you're right!"

As Hanakawa replied, something changed in the fortress. It began to shake. The shaking grew stronger, to the point where the maids on top of it couldn't stay standing, and a number of them fell back inside.

"What's going on?" Hanakawa asked, shocked.

With the maids no longer able to fire their arrows, Ragna had stopped swinging his sword. Then all at once, the fortress stood up.

"What?!"

It had grown legs. Numerous appendages rippling with muscle had sprouted under it, and they lifted the entire structure up into the air. The fortress seemed to be turning into a living thing, with something akin to blood vessels working their way through its surface.

"So this is the power of a Creator," Ragna commented. "That's impressive."

"That's way too much..."

If Akinobu and his friends were that strong, Hanakawa didn't know why they had bothered to follow the instructions in the strategy guide in the first place.

Chapter 12 — I Managed to Get Us Through by Charming Them

After the incident with the Invincible Battalion, Yogiri's group started moving again. Though there was little chance the soldiers would come back to attack them, there was always the possibility that after cooling off they would gather a larger army and try again, so the group decided it would be best to get out of the country. It wouldn't make them safe, but they figured it wouldn't be as easy for the soldiers of Manii to operate outside of their own nation.

Their destination was the neighboring kingdom of Lindy. A rather large river ran along the border, spanned by a single bridge. With each side of the bridge in a different country, there was a checkpoint on both ends.

"I'm not that familiar with crossing borders," Yogiri mentioned to Theodisia as they rode in the carriage. "Do you think they'll let us through?"

"I find it unlikely we will be able to pass without incident," she replied.

In this world, national boundaries weren't as precise as on Earth, and moving between kingdoms normally wasn't all that difficult. But thanks to the river, with only a single crossing available, traffic between these two countries was limited to this one spot, making a border checkpoint possible.

Such checkpoints and inspection stations were no doubt filled with guards, so attempting to pass through with a group of half-demons seemed likely to get them captured. However, the line of carriages managed to make it through the Manii checkpoint without issue, and after crossing the long bridge, the guards on the Lindy side gave them similarly little trouble.

"What's going on here?!" Tomochika blurted out, confused by how well things were going. She had been expecting some sort of trouble.

"I was able to get us through by Charming them," Euphemia remarked offhandedly. As an Origin Blood, she had numerous powerful abilities.

"That Charm skill is really impressive, then! But wait, if you have that, why are you being chased in the first place?" If Euphemia had access to the

Charm ability while freeing the other half-demons, Tomochika couldn't imagine that what they were doing would be recognized as a crime.

"The effect only lasts for a short time. I'd thought we could avoid pursuit with a barrier of seclusion, but I wasn't quite careful enough."

Normally, it would have been impossible for anyone to find them, but Darian's incredible ability to detect people must have been much stronger than the barrier Euphemia had erected. And if it had happened once, it could happen again. At this point, they wouldn't be able to fully trust the spell anymore.

"So, we made it to the next country, but now what?" Carol asked. The original village of the half-demons was in the Haqua Forest within the Kingdom of Manii. Running away wasn't necessarily a problem, but how far did they plan on going?

"Umm, actually," Risley offered almost apologetically, "even though we ended up saving a bunch of half-demons on our way, that wasn't our true goal." She had been searching for Yogiri in order to ask him for a favor. Since Yogiri had been sleeping for most of the time, she hadn't been able to broach the subject on the level she was hoping for yet. "But I guess if we don't do something about all of these people, we won't be able to accomplish our goals."

While it seemed like Risley might have regretted helping the others a bit, she clearly had no intention of abandoning them now.

"Do you have any actual plans?" Yogiri asked.

"I believe it would be best to find a place where others won't find us." Theodisia's answer was far from reassuring.

Tomochika tried to consider their options, but without much knowledge of this world, it was hard to come up with any helpful ideas.

"I suppose somewhere in the forest or mountains would be best," Ryouko offered. "Somewhere you could be self-sufficient."

"That would be good. Dealing with others will be difficult, so we will need to be able to acquire anything we need for ourselves. With that in mind, we'll want a place of considerable size where others won't go," Theodisia mused.

"Do you have any ideas?" asked Tomochika.

"I'm not familiar with this area, so, unfortunately, no."

"Then we really are just wandering at random, aren't we?" It wasn't all

that surprising, but they had absolutely no idea where they were going. Tomochika wasn't sure how they could proceed.

Why don't I just fly up into the sky and take a look? Mokomoko offered.

"That's right! You can fly as high up as you want, can't you?!"

Not that far, but it would certainly be better than searching from ground level.

As Tomochika's guardian spirit, the ghost couldn't stray far from her descendant's side, but as long as they weren't too far from each other, it wasn't likely to be much of an issue.

"Sounds a little contrived to me."

Well, it all comes down to my perception in the end.

With that, Mokomoko slipped through the roof of the carriage and up into the sky.

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She returned almost immediately.

"How'd it go?"

There is a mountain nearby, but although it has mineral resources, they don't seem that plentiful. There is a forest as well, but it isn't too large. It's also being used by a nearby town, so it wouldn't make an ideal place to hide.

"No good, then."

Indeed. It appears there are no well-suited places in close proximity. The only other thing that stood out to me was a large city in the distance. It may be the capital of this country.

"So finding a place to set up camp won't be that easy. Why don't we ask around in the nearby town?" Yogiri suggested.

Since no one in their party was familiar with this kingdom, it was no surprise that they were making little progress. Making inquiries at a nearby town was a sensible next step.

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Yogiri, Tomochika, and Euphemia headed into the town as a group of three.

"We're mainly just going to ask questions, so I'm not sure you needed to bother coming with us, Euphemia," Tomochika commented.

The remainder of their group was waiting a short distance from the town. A barrier had been erected to keep them hidden. In spite of the fact that it had failed them earlier, they assumed it would be enough as long as they didn't come across any monsters like Darian.

"I believe it would be unacceptable to leave this to someone else."

"I suppose that's true. It's not like we're really all that involved ourselves," Yogiri noted.

"And Takatou is likely to get fed up with whatever you guys have to deal with, so that's why I'm here," Tomochika added.

Yogiri was coming along in case anything went wrong, and Tomochika had joined them mainly to keep him in line. There were some parts of his behavior that were ethically questionable, so she felt uneasy at the prospect of letting him go alone.

"But vampires sort of seem like they can do anything, don't they?"

Euphemia had transformed herself to look Japanese like Yogiri and

Tomochika in order to hide her half-demon heritage. It wasn't simply an illusion or some kind of disguise but an actual reconstruction of her physical body. It would take someone a significant amount of work to expose her true identity.

"It does seem that way," Euphemia agreed. "There isn't much of a downside, so it feels like overall I've essentially just become stronger."

Normal vampires had all sorts of weaknesses, including silver, sunlight, being unable to cross running water, and being unable to enter a building without an invitation. An Origin Blood, however, was capable of overcoming all of those limitations.

"Was Lain incredibly strong or something?"

"Yes. Sages are not permitted to fight each other, so it is difficult to compare them, but I suspect she was among the strongest."

"She attacked us out of nowhere, so I don't know much about her."

From Yogiri and Tomochika's perspective, Lain's attack had been sudden and surprising. Yogiri had defeated her before they'd even fully understood what was happening, so they had never actually spoken to her. She had gone through the trouble of leaving a younger copy of herself—Risley—behind, so it seemed like she had planned for that eventuality, but they weren't quite sure what she was after.

"Well, it has walls, I guess, but that's about all I can say for it," Tomochika remarked, cocking her head.

As they made their way towards the wall, they passed through a forest. The route to the city was rather indistinct, and it looked like one would be able to climb the trees over the wall fairly easily.

"The walls are just a deterrent," Euphemia explained. "I doubt they offer any actual defensive abilities."

Most cities were surrounded by some kind of fortification, and as long as a settlement was under the protection of a Sage, the area would be defended by them as well. Such protection prevented Aggressors from entering and reported attempted intrusions to the Sages. The Aggressors with some level of intelligence had learned that attacking walled cities was more trouble than it was worth, so even having a rundown wall was sufficiently discouraging to monsters.

The trio reached the city gate and found a guard who seemed awfully surprised to see them.

“Can we go inside?” Yogiri asked.

“Uh, sure. That’s fine, but...”

“They’re saying they want to go in,” another guard interrupted. “Just let them go.”

The first had been about to try to convince them to stay outside, but the second guard acted as if their arrival were somehow convenient.

“What kind of flag is this?!” Tomochika couldn’t help but find their behavior questionable. “There’s definitely something going on here. Why don’t we turn back?”

“If we go back now, we won’t have learned anything,” Yogiri protested.

“What’s going on inside?” Tomochika asked the guards.

“Nothing.”

“Could you try saying that without shifting your eyes?!”

There was no response. The guard clearly had no intention of telling them anything else.

“What is happening inside the city?” This time Euphemia asked the question, and the two guards’ eyes suddenly took on hollow gazes.

“Oh, that’s right! We can just Charm them! Having a vampire around is so convenient.”

“There is nothing in the city. It’s just a normal city...” the guard murmured as if half asleep.

“They can’t lie, right?” Yogiri asked.

“Correct. But it is possible that their memories were altered beforehand.”

“Hey, why did you try to stop us?” Yogiri asked one of the guards.

“Recently...they show up around this time... If you meet them, it won’t end well...”

“And why did you say to let us do what we wanted?” he asked, turning to the other.

“They only attack a few people each time... If they saw you, I thought maybe they wouldn’t go after our townspeople...”

“All right, we probably shouldn’t stick our noses into something like this.” Tomochika was hesitant to proceed. It wasn’t like they absolutely had to visit this place. If they wanted to learn about the country, they could go to any other settlement.

“Who are ‘they’?” Yogiri asked again.

“Servants of the Sage known as the God of War...”

“I see. Then I guess we need to take a look.” He promptly began walking forward.

“Hold on a second! Don’t you think it’s a bad idea to mess with the Sages right now?” After all, they were supposed to be looking for a place where Euphemia and the other half-demons could live in peace. If they got involved with the Sages, they would lose that chance.

“We just found a clue about where one of the Sages might be,” Yogiri replied. “Sorry, but that takes priority.”

“Still...”

“Please don’t worry,” Euphemia interjected. “No matter where we go, there is always the possibility of crossing the Sages. There is no need for us to go out of our way to avoid them.”

At her urging, Tomochika relented and followed Yogiri into the town. There were numerous large trees growing within the walls. Some buildings had been built right into them, while others appeared to be only trees with doors on them. It was a place overflowing with natural beauty.

But there was a bizarre aura of quiet about it. Considering its size, one would have expected it to be much more lively, but there was barely anyone around. The few people they did see were sneaking about, darting indoors at the first chance they got.

“It’s kind of lifeless, isn’t it?”

“We won’t be able to talk to anyone like this,” Yogiri said. “I suppose we should look for somewhere to eat first.”

Walking down the main street, they found a restaurant fairly quickly. On a large tree with doors and windows built into it were hanging signs indicating food and drink. The building appeared to have been made by digging out the inside of the tree.

“Not that we would ever go to some family restaurant to gather information in our own world,” Tomochika muttered. It was strange that the waitresses of this world always seemed ready to info-dump on request.

“With Euphemia on our side, we’re gathering information on easy mode,” Yogiri replied. “That will be a big help.”

“I suppose so. You *are* pretty bad at negotiating. Even when you try to threaten people, it just ends with a bunch of them dying.” Tomochika put a hand on the door. “Wait, is it closed?!” The door wouldn’t budge. Looking through the window, she saw that it had been boarded up from the inside.

“I’ve never seen a restaurant try so hard to keep their customers out!”

“There are people in there,” Yogiri noted, peering through cracks in the boards.

It did seem like there were staff moving about inside, but the door was locked, and the windows were covered as if the locals were hiding.

“Euphemia, can you do something about this?”

“Yes, if I can meet their eyes... Like that.” As she spoke, one of the restaurant staff stumbled over to the door and opened it.

“Wow, your powers make everything so easy, I’m starting to feel guilty about it!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“So, that’s what they mean by ‘cheat powers.’ If this were a game, I’d have to start complaining.” But it was real life, so Yogiri had no problem doing things the easy way.

The three of them stepped inside.

“How did you get in?!” another staff member shouted as they entered.

“Huh? Wait, why did I let them in?” The charmed waitress returned to her senses and was immediately surprised by her own actions.

“Whatever, just lock the door!”

The waitress hurriedly locked the door behind them.

“What’s going on here?” Yogiri asked. “We just arrived in town, so we’re not sure what the trouble is.”

“This city is already done for.”

The waitress slowly began to explain the situation to them.

Chapter 13 — Please Find Some Creative Ways to Make Them Hate You

Based on their appearances, they seemed to be nothing more than thugs. They walked with pronounced swaggers, as if to say their strength was all that mattered. Large and well-muscled, the group walking towards the city consisted of ten men who looked similar enough to be siblings. They were led by a woman so thin she looked like she might snap in two.

As they approached the city, she turned back to face the men.

"Since we have some new members this time, I'll go over it again just in case," she said in a slow, officious voice. "You, over there. What is our objective?"

"To make them hate us," the new member said with a smirk. "We can do whatever we want as long as they hate us for it, right?"

"Yes. Lord Raiza will take full responsibility for all your actions. What you are doing is carrying out Lord Raiza's will. In Lord Raiza's name, all things you do will be forgiven. That said, please remember there are some limitations."

"Limitations? You said we could do whatever we wanted!"

"Correct. You may do as you like, but there is an upper limit to how many people you may kill. Considering our objective, that should be obvious. In order for us to be hated, we need someone left alive to hate us. If you kill more than your allotment allows for, you will be severely punished, so please be careful."

"What a pain in the ass."

"Don't be like that," one of the veterans replied, trying to console the newcomer. "Once you get used to it, it's nothin'. You can do whatever you want as long as you're not killing 'em."

"If you do kill, please avoid wiping out an entire family," the woman continued. "If you kill the children, leave the parents. If you kill the parents, leave the children. Furthermore, we recommend you do such things in a way

where you will clearly be seen so as to garner more hatred. Please find some creative ways to make them loathe you."

"What about the women?" the newcomer asked, clearly outing his own intentions. "Is there a limit on them?"

"Not at all. Feel free to indulge yourself. Rather, we encourage you to produce as many children as you can. Although all of you ended up being failures despite possessing Lord Raiza's genes, there is always a possibility that they will express themselves more strongly in the next generation. Please spread Lord Raiza's genes as much as possible."

"You calling us failures?!" one of the men shouted, insulted. He punched a nearby tree in anger, knocking it over easily. Although she had called them failures, they were still far stronger than any ordinary human.

"Relax. You're gettin' money just from screwing around a bit. And this is with the Sage's permission. You think there's any better job than that?"

"Money, huh? Speaking of which, can we take theirs?"

"Anything you can carry is fair game," the woman answered.

"So that's why you all have backpacks." The new guy was carrying nothing, but everyone else had large bags on their backs.

"Make sure you get one for next time."

"Our ultimate objective is to give birth to a suitable rival who will swear revenge on Lord Raiza. In order to accomplish that, the village will require resources, hence the limit on stealing."

"Dammit! Why didn't you tell me that earlier?!"

"Now then, I'm sure you won't remember any complex instructions, so I'll repeat the rules as simply as I can. One, each of you may kill a maximum of ten individuals. Two, you may only steal what you can carry. Three, anyone with a mark on the back of their neck is already reserved. They are strictly off limits."

"What mark?" the newcomer asked.

"I handed out sticks for you to mark your prey. You may do so by pressing the sticks to the backs of their necks. Use them if you take a liking to anyone. It will continue to torment them over time, so it should function well for drawing further hatred from them."

The newcomer looked again at the stick he had been handed, which was no bigger than a pencil. If someone they had marked was nearby, the stick would shake.

“Four,” the woman continued, “no setting fires. Five, when your time is up, you must withdraw immediately. I will blow the whistle after one hour. Please ensure you return to this gate within ten minutes of hearing the whistle. That is all. Please begin.”

The men immediately broke into a run towards the city, the woman following them at a more leisurely pace.

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Tomochika, Yogiri, and Euphemia sat across from the waitress, a girl named Orie. One more staff member, Orie’s little brother, Darf, was leaning against a nearby wall, arms crossed. Judging from his appearance and the sword at his waist, he was some sort of bouncer.

“I don’t think anything has made me this angry since we got to this world.” Tomochika was furious about what they had been told was coming. They had come across all sorts of unsavory characters since their arrival, but this was on a whole other level. It was beyond inhuman.

“It *is* pretty disgusting,” Yogiri agreed with a frown.

“I thought the way they treated my kind was the worst, but it seems like the people here are trying to give us a run for our money,” Euphemia replied, similarly despondent.

While the half-demons were certainly treated terribly, they were essentially being used as tools. Their oppressors didn’t go out of their way to heap true contempt on them. But in this country, the people’s hearts and minds were being toyed with, wounding them with the sole purpose of eliciting hatred. There was no word to describe it besides “evil.”

“Raiza is trying to create enemies who will swear vengeance on him. That’s why even my father...” Orie trailed off.

There was no particular reason for their town to have been targeted. But now that it had been, the harassment would never stop. Even if they begged for aid, the ones responsible for their suffering were the ones in control, so there was nothing to be done. Their final option was rebellion, but that was exactly what Raiza was hoping for.

“I wouldn’t think a country that supports all this would be able to survive for long,” Tomochika observed. As time went on, the cities would be destroyed, and in the end, the country would follow suit.

“He doesn’t care if the kingdom is destroyed,” Darf spat.

“I’ve seen Raiza,” Orie mumbled. “There’s nothing we can do against him. All we can do is pray for a revenge we can never accomplish. Is there any hell worse than this?”

“Can’t you just run away?” Tomochika asked. She couldn’t figure out why anyone would stay in a place like this.

“It doesn’t matter where we run,” Orie said, showing the back of her neck, which bore two black lines. “With this, they know where I am no matter where I go. They’ll follow me anywhere just to torment me as much as possible.”

“What is wrong with this guy?! He’s doing all this just to look for someone who can defeat him?! That’s ridiculous!” Tomochika was having a difficult time keeping her anger in check. Survival of the fittest may have been the way of the world, but the strong should have been content to kick back and relax as they ruled over the weak. If they were so strong that they had no enemies, that should have been enough.

“If they’re that determined, what good does locking the doors do?” Yogiri asked bluntly.

“Hey, you could be a little more tactful, you know.”

“It won’t really help if they come here, but if they don’t see us, they may leave us alone,” Orie explained. “And if the door doesn’t open, they may look elsewhere...” In other words, they knew full well it was probably pointless, but even so, they grasped for that tiniest sliver of hope. “Please run away. You may still be able to make it out in time.”

But her suggestion came too late. Sounds of chaos had already begun outside, and it wasn’t long before someone approached the restaurant. He stopped in front of the door, and a moment later, it was blown off its hinges. The lock hadn’t so much as slowed him down.

Standing in the now empty doorframe was a large man. “Hey, it’s been a while!”

The moment he spoke, Darf leaped from his hiding spot and swung at the man. The attack blindsided him perfectly, the sword directly striking his head. But that was it. The blade didn’t so much as cut through a single strand of hair.

“You seem awfully energetic today,” the man sneered.

“Orie, run!” Darf shouted as the man grabbed his arm.

“Nooow then, what do I do with you? If that’s the best you’ve got, I’m in trouble. I need you to hate me even more. Wait, don’t point your hatred at me, actually. This is all on Lord Raiza’s orders, you know? If you want to complain, you’ll have to take it up with him.”

“Let my brother go!” Orie screamed as she shot to her feet. “You’re just here for me, right?!”

“What a beautiful sibling bond. But come on, you don’t hate us nearly enough if you’re willing to offer your body just to calm things down a bit. Or wait, maybe you’ve just been looking forward to another round?” The man gave a vulgar grin. “But now that I think about it, the little brother seems more likely to swear revenge, doesn’t he?” The man squeezed Darf’s arm, which gave a dull crack before Darf crumpled to the floor. The man then pressed a stick onto the back of the young man’s neck, where black lines began to appear. “Now sit tight right there and watch, little bro. You’re sister’s gonna put on a nice show for you.”

The man stepped closer. “Huh? I know it’s a weird thing to point out, but you actually have customers at a time like this? Heh, those two look a lot more fun, actually,” the thug said as he turned to Tomochika and Euphemia. His intentions were plain for everyone to see. “All right, then, let’s play a different game with big sis over here. If you don’t want your brother to die, eat all your fingers.”

“Wh-What?” Orie could only stare in shock. It took a moment for Tomochika to understand what the man had even said.

“Are you saying you can’t do it? And after your poor old pops did the same thing to keep you safe.”

“Not a chance!” Orie shouted back defiantly. “Why would I expect you to keep your promise anyway?!”

“Hey, I spared your life, didn’t I? I even gave him a grandkid. He’s probably chokin’ up with joy in the afterlife.”

Orie bit her lip. The man was doing exactly what he needed to do to make her furious. This is what his gang was doing all over town—all over the country.

“W-Will you really spare my brother if I do?”

“Who knows? That’s the plan, but if you keep wasting my time, there’s a chance I’ll change my mind.”

Orie looked down at her trembling fingers. Something so horrific couldn’t

be done with an ordinary person's level of resolve.

Tomochika stood up, taking Orie's hands in her own. "Don't worry, you don't have to do it."

"B-But..."

Tomochika turned to look at the man. She was furious. This guy messing with people's heads, and the man named Raiza who was ordering it all to happen, were beyond forgiveness.

"Mokomoko, you said the time limit was thirty seconds, right? Can you do it now?"

Leave it to me.

Even a sword striking him dead-on hadn't been able to so much as cut his hair. Such an unbelievable ability could have only been a result of the Gift. Which meant that Mokomoko could temporarily disable his powers.

"Oh, come on. Don't be a pain in the ass. Just sit down."

Go!

The chair that Tomochika had been sitting on flew towards the man's face. And then the table flew at him, followed by a cup, a plate, and a pitcher of water. Everything in the restaurant began to hurtle through the air as she darted around the room.

This was a fundamental tactic of the Dannoura School of Archery. Tomochika Dannoura was fighting without holding anything back. The Dannoura family didn't fight straightforward, direct battles. A one-sided fight from a distance was the norm. That was why they'd named their martial art "archery." With a single touch, she could judge the center of gravity of the objects she was passing, and with a single finger, send them flying towards her target. In a place like this, filled with obstacles and objects, she was entirely in her element.

"Wh-What the hell?!"

The man immediately panicked, still reeling from having been struck by the chair. It was clear the attack had penetrated whatever defenses he had. He hadn't even blinked when sliced at with a sword, but now his face was twisted in pain.

With his attention occupied by the constant stream of whirling objects, he quickly lost track of Tomochika herself. A moment later he cried out in pain again as, between blows from another cup and water pitcher, a sword punched through his back. The weapon that Darf had dropped earlier stabbed

him from behind, but by the time the man had turned to face his assailant, Tomochika was already gone.

Standing directly in front of him, she delivered a kick straight into his groin, driving her toes upwards as if to mix his genitals with the rest of his internal organs. The man crumpled, pitching forward, where he was met with Tomochika's palms striking him as she stomped down, using the same technique that Romiko Jougasaki had used when she'd stolen Mokomoko's powers. The man was blown backwards, crashing hard into the wall, unconscious.

"Umm...uhhh..." Orie stared at the scene in shock.

"Why do you always have to kick them there?" Yogiri muttered, his voice shaking a little.

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"I was so angry, I just did it without thinking, but now what?!"

You went pretty far for doing it "without thinking."

Far too late, Tomochika began to consider what she had just done.

"So, that's what happens when she gets mad," Yogiri mumbled in astonishment.

"Umm, thank you. Really, thank you, but I can't imagine this will end well..." Orie was also clearly conflicted.

"They all work in a group," Darf added, struggling to his feet. "If you defeat one, then the others..."

"Could you please show me your arm?" Euphemia asked, placing a hand on his injury.

"What? The pain is gone!" Although it had been broken a moment before, Darf's arm was now as good as new.

"It's just a bit of healing magic."

"You really can do anything, can't you, Euphemia?" Tomochika commented, as if thinking she should have left the last fight to Euphemia as well.

"No, I cannot neutralize the Gift like you did. I have no idea if my attacks would have worked against him."

"By the way, Mokomoko, can you do that whenever you want?" Yogiri asked.

It is a rather involved undertaking, and it consumes the entirety of my computational power. On top of that, I can't do anything else at the same time. I couldn't change the form of the battle suit or enhance your physical abilities while maintaining the block.

"That wasn't the clearest response, but you're saying no, right?" Tomochika replied.

They were talking nonchalantly, but there were still plenty of enemies about. Thinking they had better move on while they could, Yogiri stood up.

"Finally had enough of sitting around? What do you plan on doing now?" Tomochika asked, somewhat irritated.

"I think we should get a move on. After a fight like that, the others are going to take notice."

"Really? But even if we leave—"

"Hello. In order to audit the amount of hate being generated, we monitor all the activities of our staff."

A slender woman stepped through the broken doorway. Behind her were nine large men. They were the group known as the Children of Raiza. They had a blood connection to their leader, as evidenced by their shared look as siblings. Rumor had it that Raiza went around producing as many children as he possibly could.

"What do you mean, 'audit'?" Yogiri asked. The word seemed out of place in this context.

"Naturally, it means we inspect the work they've done and evaluate the results of their efforts. It is a principle of ours to provide appropriate compensation for the hard work of our staff."

"Then I guess this guy gets a pretty bad grade," Yogiri observed, pointing at the unconscious man. "Will he even get paid?"

"We're not that unforgiving. He may have failed this time, but he simply needs to try harder."

"So, what do you want?"

"Our job is to elicit as much hatred towards Lord Raiza as possible. However, if our prey fights back, it will hinder our future endeavors. As such, we will be forced to put you all to death."

The men stepped forward. No matter how strong Tomochika's group may have been, they were clearly outnumbered. The thugs must have been confident that the odds would give them enough of an edge.

“That doesn’t feel like it’s only a threat, does it?” Yogiri had decided for himself that he would never kill someone merely because they made him angry. So no matter how vile these people were, if they didn’t try to hurt him or Tomochika, he had no reason to harm them.

But seeing as they clearly intended to kill them, that was another story. Maybe it was a sign of his immaturity, or maybe it was a sign of how human he was becoming, but when Yogiri saw the lines indicating killing intent coming from them, he felt a wave of satisfaction.

“Die.”

The Children of Raiza collapsed as one.

“Excuse me?” The woman locked up, staring at the fallen men, a look of confusion on her face. “This is not the time to be shirking your duties, everyone. I realize you’re little more than simple ruffians, good for nothing but sowing chaos, but this is embarrassingly unprofessional.” She had clearly drawn the wrong conclusion.

“They’re dead,” Yogiri clarified. “I killed them.”

The man that Tomochika had beaten unconscious was still alive. But as Yogiri turned to see how he was doing, Euphemia walked over and stomped his skull in.

“It appears I misstepped,” she said. “How careless of me.”

Euphemia had known that Tomochika wouldn’t go far enough to kill him herself, and Yogiri wouldn’t use his power on an unconscious person. But if the man had woken up, they would have been forced to make a choice to spare him or not, so she had taken it upon herself to do the dirty work.

With the problem now addressed, Yogiri turned back to the woman. Having processed the situation, she had regained her composure.

“I see. You are so strong that I couldn’t even tell what you did at first. But such retaliation is well within expectations. Now that you have found a glimmer of hope, an even greater despair—”

Ignoring the speech, Euphemia sank her fangs into the woman’s neck.

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“Euphemia? What are you doing?” Tomochika was taken aback by the unexpected attack.

“She had a resistance to being Charmed, so I decided to turn her into a vampire and make her a permanent subordinate. It appears to have gone well.”

The woman was now kneeling at Euphemia’s feet.

“Vampire’s are insanely overpowered, you know!”

“Actually, that helps a lot,” Yogiri remarked in contrast to Tomochika’s skepticism. “It’s kind of hard to stop at threatening people with a power like mine.”

“I get the feeling Euphemia can solve more or less any problem.”

“Okay, let’s hear it,” Yogiri ordered. “Tell us about this Raiza.”

The woman appeared to be related to the man in question, so her help would undoubtedly be useful.

Chapter 14 — He Kind of Looked a Bit Like Me, Didn't He?

The city was called the City of the War God. Although no one knew when that name had come into use, the reason for it was clear. The ruler of the city was a man named Raiza, who called himself a God of War. He was well aware of how silly the name was, but that was exactly why he'd taken it on. There were likely plenty of people who thought the name ridiculous, but if they wanted to deny his status as a God of War, they'd need to defeat him in battle. If they didn't recognize his status, they were more than welcome to challenge him.

But Raiza was too strong. It was rare for anyone to challenge him, so he had tried to spread his reputation as a God of War, thinking that he might get a few reckless challengers coming to deny his claim. He wanted nothing more than to fight. He had continued to accrue strength for just that reason, but in the end that strength had prevented him from finding viable opponents. In fact, things had worked out exactly the opposite of how he'd intended.

There was no way he could get weaker now, and going easy on others would defeat the purpose. He wanted an opponent he could fight at full strength. So he'd created a city.

The city served two broad purposes. The first was to make Raiza's presence known. He wanted it to be common knowledge that anyone who went there could fight him. He hoped that some challengers would eventually come forward. The second purpose it served was as a training ground. He gathered—against their will—those who showed any sort of promise and personally saw to their instruction.

However, he was now beginning to give up on that plan. No matter how promising they were, the process of training them showed him how limited their strength really was. So he had recently trapped a number of powerful individuals inside the city, instructing them to fight each other in hopes of forcing an explosive growth within some of them. He had yet to achieve any

results from that method, and while it was certainly better than sitting around and waiting for challengers to approach him, at this point it didn't even serve as an ideal way of killing time.

But if one were to hear his story—one who was familiar with this world—they would no doubt think of the same question. If someone wanted a powerful enemy, they needed to look no further than the Sages. So why didn't he challenge the Sages himself?

Unfortunately, that was not an option for Raiza. After all, he himself was a Sage. The Great Sage had forbidden them from fighting each other. No matter how strong he became, he could never violate that ironclad law.

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Raiza was covered in blood. Normally he would never get caught in the sprays of blood that spilled from his opponents, but his enemy this time had been a bit different. It was enormous, a giant so large that he had to crane his head up to look at it. It was one of those creatures known as the Aggressors. He had no idea what their objective was, but they occasionally came from other worlds to attack the locals.

Leaping into the air, he swung his fist, knocking the giant's head straight off its shoulders. He didn't know what kind of being it was, or if it was even a living thing at all, but it seemed to have a heart that pumped blood through its body. A tremendous amount of it now spurted from the giant, creating a sea of red all around them, drenching him thoroughly.

Unable to fight against the other Sages, the only opponents that offered him any sort of resistance were the Aggressors, but this time even that type of adversary had been disappointingly weak.

"What a boring fight."

He hadn't had high expectations, but fights with these invaders were his only chances to face potentially worthwhile opponents. Each time one appeared, he couldn't help but secretly hope that it would prove a worthy rival.

Raiza kicked at the dirt. For a moment, he soared through the air, flying towards the City of the War God. He made it home in no time at all, landing on top of the enormous tower that dominated the center of the city.

As he landed, a woman ran up beside him.

“Welcome back.”

“How are things going?”

“Pot A has reached a stalemate. Pot B has been completely wiped out. Pot C is—”

“I don’t need all the details. Do any of them look promising?”

“At the moment, no. However, someone has just passed through Tower B.”

“I’ll go take a look.”

The city used numerous methods to try to create and identify powerful individuals. “Pots” were locations where stronger individuals were trapped together and forced to fight. The “towers” were designed as obstacles for the powerful to pass through, to separate the wheat from the chaff. While Raiza welcomed challengers, fighting weaklings was a waste of his time, so he used this method to determine those who were worth his attention.

“Tower B was being held by Alistar the Bladeless, right?”

“He was killed instantly. I am told he was devoured without even being able to fight back.”

“He was devoured? That sounds interesting. Such an unusual way of fighting sounds promising.”

Raiza made to leap straight to Tower B, but the woman stopped him. “Please wait. You should at least clean yourself off first. If you meet the challenger looking like that, they’ll be quite taken aback.”

“Ah, I suppose you’re right. Being covered in blood won’t look that scary either.”

Raiza complied, cleaning himself up before heading on.

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The challenger on top of Tower B was a bizarre sight.

“Can I ask a question?” Raiza asked upon seeing him.

“What is it?”

“You aren’t human, are you? You look more like one of the Aggressors.”

“Do you not accept challenges from non-humans?”

“No, it’s fine. But if I kill you right away, I won’t be able to satisfy my curiosity.”

The challenger looked human overall, but he had a few parts too many.

The upper body of a small woman was growing from one flank. From his right shoulder flared a single wing, and from his right elbow grew a leg that ended in a hoof. Raiza also recognized the arm sticking out of the challenger's chest as being the right arm of Alistar the Bladeless. The challenger seemed to have parts of random creatures sticking out of his body all over the place.

"I can absorb the power of anything I eat. I can't be bothered to remember everything I've ever eaten, but I wouldn't be surprised if one of them had been an Aggressor."

"So, that appearance is just a side effect?"

"Who cares what I look like? All I have to do is kill you!"

"Yeah, that's right. Who cares what you look like? Let's get started."

Raiza lowered himself into a fighting stance. He didn't really need to, but he did it anyway out of consideration for his opponent. An instant later, the challenger was right in front of him.

"Oh? How'd you do that?"

"I ate the space between us. There's nothing I can't eat."

It seemed this creature could teleport. As if to show off how relaxed he was, he didn't even attack. Raiza responded in kind. He was more interested in seeing what his challenger would do.

"And that doesn't just mean living things or space either," the stranger continued. "For example, I can even eat cause and effect! That is my power! I can devour the process and get exactly the result I want!"

As the monster disappeared, Raiza slammed the floor with his fist. "Pathetic. I was impressed by your willingness to pursue strength even if it meant turning into a freak, but if you're going to be so pretentious about it, it's all a waste."

The Sage's fist had caught the challenger, whose body was now sandwiched between it and the floor, his head nowhere to be seen. He had been in the middle of attempting something, but Raiza had simply smashed right through him.

The Sage had fought any number of opponents that could do things such as Phenomenon Alteration, Causality Manipulation, Dimensional Transference, and Spatial Severance. He could smash through any of those abilities with his instincts alone.

"He kind of looked a bit like me, didn't he?"

He had previously been distracted by his challenger's freakish nature, but thinking about it now, the monster had looked somewhat familiar. Rampaging around random towns and impregnating random women was part of Raiza's daily routine. It wasn't to fulfill some desire for destruction or rampant lust, though. He was merely trying to engender a true, pure hatred towards himself in hopes that it would cause his victims to seek revenge against him.

"Pretty pathetic for one of my brats."

He had no interest in one of his own children if they were that weak. The realization only made him feel more empty.

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The woman that Euphemia had turned into a vampire was called Elmoa. Her job was to put together a group whose sole purpose was to generate hatred towards Raiza, and to take them around the country. The group was made up of Raiza's abandoned children, and they were allowed to do anything they liked as long as it served his purpose. Of course, if they were left entirely to their own devices, they could wipe a city out in no time. That's why supervisors like Elmoa were needed.

"You bitch! How can you talk about it so calmly?!" Darf surged to his feet, kicking away his chair.

The only ones currently in the restaurant were Yogiri, Tomochika, Euphemia, and the restaurant staff, Orie and Darf, as they questioned Elmoa. They were all sitting in random seats around the room.

"Excuse me, calm down for a second," Tomochika said, grabbing Darf by the collar and forcing him back into his chair with one smooth motion. "We're trying to listen to her story."

"But she's the one who's been leading these rampages through our town!"

"And we're the ones who stopped them," Yogiri returned, exasperated. "Now we need as much information from her as we can get. Can you let us work for a bit?"

Darf replied with a sullen grunt, averting his eyes. But in spite of his reluctance, he stood down.

"All right, so we know that Raiza is a disgusting person," Yogiri continued. "Where is he now?"

“He is in the City of the War God. Lord Raiza never strays far from there.”

“What’s going on with her right now?” Yogiri asked Euphemia. “Is she completely under your control?” He felt a little uneasy, as her respect for Raiza didn’t seem blunted in the least by her transformation.

“It does seem a bit strange, doesn’t it?”

“Strange as in...she was already under someone else’s control?” He figured these types of mind control powers worked on a first come, first served basis, but that wasn’t actually the case.

“Those under my control aren’t completely robbed of their will,” Euphemia explained. “Their original personalities are maintained, only with a sense of loyalty to me added to that. In her case, her loyalty and fear of this Raiza are engraved so deeply into her psyche that they’ve become a fundamental part of who she is.”

“Well, as long as she can talk, I guess it doesn’t matter.” He supposed if the people being controlled couldn’t act on their own to some degree, it would be hard for the vampire to make much use of them.

Moving on, Yogiri asked Elmoa how to get to the City of the War God. Apparently, it wasn’t hard to find. It was a city with a tower so large that they could already see it from where they were, and all they had to do was walk straight towards it. There were no restrictions on who could enter, so they would be able to get in without issue.

“He’s looking for people to fight him, right? Which means anyone can go in?”

“Anyone who reaches the minimum level can face him. There are selection trials available to confirm that you meet the requirements.”

From what she told them, the city itself was fairly large, and within it were a number of trials to sort the potential challengers into groups. The large tower in the distance was just one of those facilities.

“What is Raiza’s ability?”

“He doesn’t have any particular power that stands out. He’s just incredibly strong. None of the people in this room are strong enough to stand before him.”

“You mean we wouldn’t pass the trials?”

“No, I imagine even a single one of his breaths would kill the lot of you.”

“That seems a bit much,” Tomochika replied, sinking into thought.

Yogiri recalled the Sages they had met so far. They had all been quite powerful, but none had seemed as oppressively strong as this Raiza. It was possible he was the strongest of the Sages.

"Does he have a Philosopher's Stone?" Yogiri asked.

"I'm not sure."

"I guess I'll have to ask him directly, then."

Yogiri's only objective was to collect the Philosopher's Stones held by the Sages so that he could use them to get back to Japan. No matter what sort of hatred he might personally feel towards Raiza, it wasn't enough to justify killing him. Furthermore, if he killed him while the stone was inside his body, it would lose its power. He would need to be very careful in dealing with this guy.

"I guess I'll go by myself this time," he suggested, satisfied with the interrogation.

"That's probably for the best. If he can kill us just by breathing, the rest of us will only slow you down."

Up until now, everyone they had fought had attacked them first, but this time they knew where their enemy was, so they could make thorough preparations. There was no need to take Tomochika with him this time. When it came to defeating an enemy, Yogiri was more than capable of doing it alone. There was still a risk in leaving Tomochika behind, but it seemed significantly less dangerous than taking her along this time.

"Do you not need to take Elmoa with you?" Euphemia asked.

"If everyone is allowed in, I shouldn't need a guide."

"What do you plan on doing with her?" Orie interjected, breaking her silence.

"Hmm. I didn't really think about what we'd do with her in the future," Euphemia replied.

"I guess turning people into vampires willy-nilly has its own problems." Tomochika once again sank into thought along with the half-demon. Once a person became a vampire, there was no going back. Such transformations should probably be well thought through beforehand.

"We're going to pay her back, aren't we?!" Darf interjected. "Do you realize what she's done to us?!"

"So you plan on doing to her what she did to me?" Orie challenged.

"W-Well..." Darf hesitated.

“There’s no point in taking your anger out on her.”

From the siblings’ perspective, having Raiza’s subordinates killed wasn’t worth much. As long as Raiza himself was alive, there would be any number of underlings to replace those who fell. Even if they could vent their anger on her now, it would only bring about a worse fate for them later on.

“Could you please take her away?” Orie asked.

“I suppose so. Now that she is my slave, I do have some responsibility for her.”

“Oh, how about this?” Tomochika suddenly had an idea. “She’ll do whatever you ask, right? Why not send her back to this Raiza guy and get her to stop the others from rampaging around?” While it was likely a futile attempt, it was better than not trying anything at all.

Yogiri felt that Tomochika’s plan had some merit, but they weren’t able to put it into action. The moment the suggestion was made, Elmoa punched a hand into her own chest and crushed her heart.

“Huh? What? Was that my fault?!” Tomochika immediately began to panic as Elmoa fell to the floor.

“I guess I was a bit naive,” Euphemia observed, looking down at the lifeless woman. “I prevented her from attacking anyone else, but I never thought to stop her from harming herself.”

The heart was one of the weaknesses of a normal vampire. An Origin Blood wouldn’t be killed by something so trifling, but a freshly turned vampire like Elmoa wouldn’t be anywhere near that resilient.

“I suppose she couldn’t bear the idea of disobeying Raiza’s orders,” Yogiri mused. “It’s impressive how much you can control someone through fear.” It was becoming increasingly evident that bringing Tomochika with him would be a bad idea. “Anyway, we can at least travel together until we get close to the City of the War God. But I’ll be the only one who goes inside.”

Yes, about that, Mokomoko cut in. *I find it hard to believe anything could happen to the boy, but I’m not sure we can trust his judgment when he is alone.*

“Do you want to come too, Mokomoko? I thought you couldn’t leave Tomochika’s side.”

Mokomoko was a ghost, so she hardly needed protection. And she would be good to bring along as someone to talk to, but the distance would be a

problem.

Fear not, I have a solution for that as well!

They listened to Mokomoko's plan.

Chapter 15 — From Now On, I, Mokomoko Dannoura, Shall Bear the Title of Heroine!

Yogiri and Mokomoko were heading for the City of the War God. It was a fairly large, walled city. Even from the outside, the towers it was famous for were clearly visible.

“The star of the story has now officially changed!” Mokomoko cackled. “From now on, I, Mokomoko Dannoura, shall bear the title of heroine!” she declared loudly enough for everyone around them to hear.

She was no longer a spirit invisible to the naked eye. Instead, standing beside Yogiri was a girl, just a bit younger than he was, wearing a red dress and gloves to match. Mokomoko was making use of the Enju-type robot.

“What are you talking about?”

“This robotic body has plenty of combat potential, and the one controlling it is a master martial artist! In addition, I can use this mysterious metal to create all sorts of useful items! And to top it all off, what a charming exterior! I should be more than qualified to be the heroine of this story now!”

“So, you admit your original form wasn’t remotely charming.”

“N-Not at all! If you think about it, my true form has its own sort of charm too!”

“Regardless, I’m not into flat girls, so no thank you.”

“Your bluntness is almost refreshing. But if that’s what you’re after, my descendant’s chest is very much up for grabs, I would think. I doubt she would turn you down if you asked.”

“I can’t exactly make a move on her in our current situation, can I?”

“I can’t see why not! I don’t think she’d be as unhappy about it as you imagine.”

“By the way, Mokobot, are you actually *possessing* her this time?”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that name...”

Although the spirit now looked exactly like Enju, Yogiri felt strange referring to her by his friend's name, so he had come up with a new nickname for her in her current form.

"Well, whatever you choose to call me means little. This is more like remote control than possession."

By hacking the android's core processor, Mokomoko was able to manipulate it through long-range electromagnetic waves.

"Now then, we are about to enter the city, so please remember not to kill him."

"Don't worry; I'll remember."

The pair approached the gate. No guards were posted there, so they were able to walk straight in.

"It looks like a normal city, doesn't it?" Yogiri commented.

They had heard the place was ruled by an outrageously arrogant man, but from the looks of it, people seemed to be going about their lives as usual. The purpose of the city was to act as a filter for those strong enough to challenge Raiza, but obviously not everyone there was a fighter.

"I guess this is what an average city in this world looks like."

There were many stone buildings, and the roads were paved for the horse-drawn carriages that rolled along them. It was similar in appearance to the other cities they had visited so far. Of course, it was hard to determine what counted as "normal" in this world. Worlds were organized in a sort of abstract hierarchical structure, and this one existed at the lowest level of that order. As such, there were many examples of people and objects from higher worlds having made their way down here, so the native technologies and cultures were somewhat difficult to identify.

"I suppose there are plenty of abnormal things here too," Yogiri continued.

There were numerous towers boasting at least a hundred floors scattered about the city. There were also a number of large domed structures visible. The battles that occurred within the city were seemingly restricted to those areas.

"I thought it would be more violent around here somehow. It seems like they're locking the challengers up and making them fight. I've heard of things like that before."

"You're speaking of the ancient art of Kodoku, no? It certainly has that

feel to it, doesn't it?"

The city was peaceful. How would Orie and Darf have felt seeing that? Yogiri frowned. For such a disparity to exist within a single country was nothing short of absurd.

"We came here because they said that anyone could meet the Sage, but how do we actually do that?"

"I guess we'll have to find someone and ask."

The Sages were a group characterized by their fickleness, so it was rare for them to show up where just anyone could see them. But Raiza, the Sage in charge of this particular city, was different. He had built this place for the sole purpose of gathering and welcoming challengers.

The pair stopped to speak with one of the locals they passed along the way and were told, "In that case, just go to the reception building." They were then given a set of directions and did just that.

Inside was a woman behind a desk, looking every bit the receptionist. She seemed almost bored, so they figured there weren't many challengers around.

"Hey, I'd like to meet the Sage," Yogiri announced.

"Very well. Will you accept the tower challenge?"

"If I can meet him after that, then sure. What's the challenge?"

"Each tower is constructed of at least one hundred floors. Challengers must make their way through the building, starting on the first floor. By defeating the master of each floor, you can obtain the key that will lead you to the next one."

"And I have to get to the top, right?" He was already dreading just how tedious this challenge would be. No matter how you looked at it, a hundred floors was too much.

"Yes. If you can make it to the roof, you will have earned the right to challenge Lord Raiza."

"I'm kind of curious—are the people in there just sitting in the rooms with nothing to do? They must be bored out of their minds." Waiting around for challengers to show up had to be an incredibly dull existence.

"They shouldn't be bored. I'm sure they are all training desperately to someday escape the towers," the receptionist replied in a surprisingly light tone.

"Escape? They're being held prisoner there?"

"Correct. The Floor Masters fight among themselves, changing the floors

they are responsible for based on their ranks. Once someone successfully defends their position at the highest floor for ten consecutive battles, they are permitted to challenge Lord Raiza."

There was clearly a different system governing those inside the tower and those challenging it from without, but either way, it seemed like all he had to do was beat everyone else to get to the top.

"You asked earlier if I was okay with the tower. Are there other options?"

"There are also the pots. In this challenge, a hundred or more contestants are gathered together for a battle royale. That is a much quicker option but often ends with no survivors, and the few survivors who do make it through are generally at death's doorstep by the time they finish. I wouldn't recommend the option for outsiders."

"All right, let's go with the tower, then." If he went into the pots, he might be forced to kill people who were there against their will, but in the tower, all he had to do was take the keys from them. In the end, he decided to attempt Tower A.

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"Ha! Did you think there would only be one Floor Master? We Twin Flames will—"

"Die." Yogiri killed one of the pair.

"What?!" the surviving girl yelped. "Wh-What did you do?"

"If the gap in strength between us is big enough, you won't even see it when I punch, right? Something like that."

"What a crude explanation," Mokomoko sighed, shaking Enju's head. She hadn't officially registered as a participant but was permitted to follow Yogiri and observe.

"Give me the key," Yogiri said. "If you don't, I'll have to kill you and take it."

The final Floor Master offered no resistance, promptly handing over the key. Yogiri took it and opened the door, which led to a staircase that took them up to the roof.

"That was just as annoying as I thought it would be."

"We managed to make it through rather smoothly, though. Too bad we had to kill almost everyone to get here."

“They all tried to kill me. I didn’t have a choice.”

He had no reason to spare those who were actively trying to harm him. If someone was willing to take another’s life, they had to be ready to die themselves.

“Congratulations. Lord Raiza is heading towards you now, so please wait a moment,” a voice rang out from somewhere.

“We’ll meet him here?”

The rooftop was a flat space with no fixtures or ornamentation. Yogiri had expected them to be sent to a more formal location that could accommodate an audience, but Raiza obviously wasn’t big on style.

“You will likely be expected to fight him immediately.”

“At least it will be quick, then.”

As he said that, something fell from the sky, sending tremors throughout the tower. A heavily built, thickly muscled man had appeared. The rumors had painted him as some sort of battle junkie, but at first glance he didn’t quite give that impression. While it certainly seemed like he had a tempered body that was thoroughly ready for combat, his gaze was surprisingly cold and calculating. His expression held a clarity that made the stories of him being a crude, barbaric individual seem like lies.

“Okay, I know the rules say I’ll fight anyone who makes it through the tower, but you can’t possibly be that strong,” Raiza commented, looking Yogiri up and down. He was inspecting him intently, as if assuming that he had missed something or that Yogiri possessed some unknown quality.

“I don’t have much of a comeback for that.”

“Is the girl my challenger, then?”

“No. I’m the one who cleared the tower. If you don’t feel like fighting, do you mind letting me win by forfeiting?”

“What? What a strange thing to say. There’s no reward for this battle, you know. The only reason people challenge me is to defeat me.”

“Well, I actually came here because you have something I want.”

“Let’s hear it. If you entertain me, I’ll give you any reward you ask for.”

“The first thing is a Philosopher’s Stone. Do you have one?”

“Yep. And? Is there something else?”

“I heard you established this city and you rule over it yourself. So it’s like a possession of yours, isn’t it?”

“Sure. Everything in this city, down to the last pebble, belongs to me. All

of it exists to give birth to a worthy rival for me to fight."

"Okay, then give me the city too." Yogiri figured the place would serve as a good location for the half-demons to use as a home.

"Done. I'll give you everything. If you beat me, of course." Yogiri had wondered if he'd gone too far with his requests, but Raiza accepted immediately. "Shall we begin?"

The Sage sank into a combat-ready stance. It was a calm, solid position, one that even a complete novice like Yogiri could recognize as being unbreakable by any ordinary person.

"Okay, let's start with the right leg."

Of course, there was nothing ordinary about Yogiri's power, so he had no problems on that front.

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Raiza was disappointed. He had arrived after hearing that someone had cleared Tower A, but the challenger was a normal teenager. He seemed frail enough that he might die with a single hit of Raiza's breath, so the Sage had to be careful even in speaking to him. He thought the boy might have possessed some sort of hidden power, but his challenger carried himself like someone who had had only a brief introduction to martial arts.

Raiza had refined his ability to judge others during his search for powerful opponents. He was almost never wrong, but if he was right, the boy's presence here was strange. There was no way he could have made it to the top of the tower if he was as weak as he appeared. Even the girl standing beside him seemed far more powerful than her companion. She appeared to be some sort of machine, but the way she moved and the way in which she carried herself spoke of a true master. However, when he asked, he was told that the boy was the one who had cleared the tower.

In spite of his doubts, he agreed to the boy's request for a reward. He had taken an interest in him. It very much seemed like the stranger intended to win. Raiza had experienced any number of challengers losing their nerve and making a single desperate attack, assured of their own defeat before the battle even started, and it was always a letdown when that happened. He much preferred it this way.

Well, that's fine. I don't care how, just surprise *me.*

Raiza's expectations had been dashed countless times before, so he no longer felt any anticipation for battles like this. The most he could hope for was to at least see something a little different.

He settled himself into his self-taught fighting stance. It was a meaningless pose, done entirely for show.

"Okay, let's start with the right leg," the boy said.

Raiza suddenly lost his footing. Unable to put any strength into his leg, he fell to the ground. It took him completely by surprise. He had no idea what was going on. He didn't know what the boy had done or what had happened to him.

"You bastard! What did you do?!"

"It's like a super high-speed attack. It was so fast you couldn't even sense it," his challenger replied as if it were too much of a pain to even explain.

"Like hell it was! I can perceive objects moving at the speed of light! I saw you! You didn't do *anything*!"

Aside from having spoken, the boy hadn't made a single move. Raiza felt himself becoming enraged. After so many years of feeling nothing regardless of any attack that came his way, he was now angry for the first time in a long time.

"You can see things moving at the speed of light? I'm not sure I believe that."

"It's not nearly as unbelievable as your own 'power,'" the machine girl told the boy. "Leaving everyone behind was the right choice. His voice alone is enough to kill an ordinary human."

At her words, Raiza realized that he had been shouting with no consideration for the pair across the roof from him. Cracks and fissures now ran across the surface of the floor. It had been specially reinforced to survive the intensity of the battles expected to be held there, but it had begun to break under the strain of his voice.

"Well? If you give up now and give me what I asked for, I'll leave things there."

"Ha! You think something like this will stop me? This is just the beginning!"

"Left arm." As the boy muttered, Raiza's left arm immediately lost all strength and fell to his side, lifeless.

"This is amazing!" The Sage swung his right arm down, slamming it into

the floor. The blow demolished the entire tower beneath him.

Naturally, those standing on top of the roof had no option but to fall. Raiza gave himself over to gravity. By kicking off from the ground, he could travel as fast as if he were teleporting, but he possessed no ability to suspend himself in the air. As he fell, he looked at the boy.

“I thought you could control your fall by yourself,” his female friend complained. The boy was gripping her leg like one would hold an umbrella, while the girl had grown a pair of jet-black wings that kept the two of them aloft.

“This is easier.”

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With a shout, Raiza threw his remaining functional fist forward. He was hardly within range for a punch to land, but it didn't matter. The shock wave that it emitted would be enough to pulverize anyone on the receiving end, even from a distance.

But the boy didn't react. The shock wave dissipated harmlessly before reaching him.

"We're going to get buried in rubble at this rate."

"Shall we relocate, then?" The girl flapped her wings, heading for a nearby clearing in the city below them.

Raiza set off in pursuit. Although he possessed no abilities that allowed him to actually fly, by unleashing shock waves as he had done a moment before, he could somewhat control his trajectory through the air.

"Left leg."

But with both legs suddenly paralyzed, he failed to make a smooth landing. Losing his balance, he slammed into a fountain in the middle of the city square. That wasn't enough to harm him, of course, and even if it had been, he would have healed immediately. But there were no signs of his legs or left arm recovering yet.

"You're being awfully messy this time, aren't you? You were much more precise before, targeting their ankles and fingers."

"It's kind of a pain to do it like that. I don't have any information I need to get from him, so it's easiest to just stop him from moving."

The girl used her wings to control their descent, leading the pair of them to a soft landing nearby.

"Do you want to keep going?" the boy asked. "You still have a chance at life if you give up now."

"Living with nothing but a right arm sounds like quite a challenge," his companion commented.

"What the hell are you?! What did you do to me?!"

As Raiza shouted, the rubble filling the clearing was blown away, thrown in the boy's direction, yet nothing hit him. He was able to step widely around everything that came his way. His movements were sloppy, but he seemed to be able to predict the paths of the flying debris.

"What are you so angry about? You wanted to know what it's like to lose, right? Isn't this exactly what you've been asking for?"

It was true that Raiza had despaired at his own strength and yearned to

taste defeat—at least, that was the story he had told the world. But he had misgivings about his defeat being so absolute. This fight was entirely one-sided. He couldn't even tell what the attacks against him were. Such a situation was certainly possible if the difference in their power levels was large enough, but the unexpected experience was so confusing, he couldn't accept it. Raiza had wanted to have a true clash of power against another. If he had ultimately lost the fight, he would have been satisfied.

But this was different. His steps could split the earth, and his fists could turn back the flow of a river. He could follow movements at the speed of light, and the aura wrapped around him could nullify even conceptual attacks. But nothing was working. There was nothing he could do. He was helpless as, bit by bit, control of his own body was being stolen from him. This didn't even qualify as a fight.

"Go to hell! How could I accept losing in this way?!"

"You're making a fool of yourself," the boy sighed. "I thought you were supposed to be a real warrior. Right arm."

Raiza abruptly lost all feeling in his right arm. With all four limbs gone, he no longer had the ability to move.

"Now then, if you're still not willing to give up, I'll have to take the Philosopher's Stone by force. It's in your chest, right?"

"Good question," the girl replied. "Lain kept hers separate from her body."

"I was told that if it was in the body, it would lose its power when he died, but if he can still talk, it should be fine."

The girl stepped closer to Raiza, who answered with a roar. It wasn't just a scream but a full-powered attack with his breath. That explosive howl was enough to obliterate the buildings in front of him.

"Well, I can't get close like this," the girl said as she jumped behind the boy. "I'm impressed with the power he can wield with only his mouth."

Raiza couldn't help but be impressed in return by her quick assessment.

"So, how do we deal with that?" the boy wondered. "If we want to stop him from breathing, I guess I should kill his diaphragm? Going for specific muscles seems a little complicated, so I guess I'll just do the whole area around the lungs."

As the boy spoke, Raiza stopped breathing. The muscles governing his ability to do so had simply stopped, and he was no longer able to take in

oxygen.

"Don't you think that will kill him?"

"If he's a Sage, he should be good for a while, right? Let's take a look while he's still alive. If the stone isn't inside him, we can find it later."

"You really are putting on an act in front of Tomochika, aren't you?"

"I'm careful around her. I don't want to make her hate me for no reason."

"Well, that's fine. There's no need to go easy on him. We know full well what kind of person he is." The girl stepped up to the Sage once again. "Is he releasing shock waves just by blinking at me? This man is a true monster."

Raiza put whatever moving body parts he had left to work. His eyes and mouth could still move. That alone should have been enough to kill an ordinary human, but the robot girl didn't so much as slow down. She kicked him, knocking him onto his stomach.

It was then that Raiza finally began to feel fear. He had suddenly realized that this was the end for him, that there was no coming back from it. He couldn't even beg for his life.

He was tasting the bitterness of defeat far more than he ever could have anticipated.

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Mokomoko's fingers turned black and extended, becoming a razor-sharp blade. Like the wings on her back, the weapon was made from the mysterious material they had obtained from the Aggressor, which she could control at will. Bringing the blade down, she cut into the Sage's back.

"Hm. Well, this is certainly a nuisance."

The blade cut through the flesh without resistance, but the moment it did, the body regenerated. Still, all she had to do was create a clamping mechanism to hold the flesh apart, allowing her to progress deeper.

"With his lungs no longer functioning, he appears to have become considerably weaker. I imagine this would have been impossible otherwise." Mokomoko pulled a round stone out of his body—the Philosopher's Stone they were after. With their prize in hand, she returned to Yogiri's side. "And there we go. But it's too bad. It seems all the flags we set up with the beautiful girls in the tower were for naught. Normally, you would make them into comrades to join you as you traveled upwards to challenge the boss."

From Yogiri's perspective, it didn't matter how attractive they were if they were his enemies, and they would only slow him down if they tagged along.

"That makes two stones. I guess we're pretty close to a third one. I wonder if three's enough to go home."

In addition to the stone they had received from Sion, they now had Raiza's, and Risley had Lain's as well.

"It's hard to say. It may serve us to meet that robot Aggressor one more time. It seemed well informed about such matters."

"We really should have asked beforehand."

But their trip here hadn't been planned. They had only come this way because they were traveling with the half-demons.

"Next is the matter of the ownership of the city," Mokomoko stated, looking down at the fallen Sage. "I wonder how we go about obtaining that with him in this state?"

Raiza's limbs and lungs were dead, and his back was opened up. He was still alive, but any sort of communication with him at this point would be challenging.

"I'm sure that once we say we beat Raiza, things will work out somehow."

A crowd had been watching them from a distance. There was no way anyone in this city was unaware of how strong the Sage was, so seeing him defeated at Yogiri's hands should have been enough to ensure that they did what he said. Yogiri felt a little optimistic about that.

Chapter 16 — She Was Hoping You Had Come Night Crawling

Raiza lay motionless on the pavement of the city square. He had been attempting to move even while lying facedown, but Yogiri had quickly put an end to that. All four of the former ruler's limbs and the muscles needed to breathe had been eliminated. His back had been violently torn apart so that Mokomoko could retrieve the Philosopher's Stone from him. While it all appeared rather inhumane and cruel at first glance, considering Raiza's actions, Yogiri had a hard time feeling they had gone too far.

"Looks like we're surrounded," he noted.

"Not that it seems like anyone is interested in revenge."

Raiza, Yogiri, and Mokomoko were surrounded by the residents of the City of the War God. The crowd gathered around them was enormous, to the point where it didn't look like they'd be able to push their way out. The locals must have come to see what had happened when they'd realized that Raiza had destroyed the tower. And once they were greeted by this unbelievable sight, they had all but frozen solid.

Raiza had lost. It must have looked unreal. Even with him lying on his stomach, helpless, it was understandably hard for them to believe. That was how powerful he had been. They couldn't even imagine the possibility of him being defeated.

"So, what do we do with the people of the city?" Yogiri asked. "They're separate from the ones who were forced to fight each other, right?"

"Right. Sustaining the activities of a city requires the work of ordinary citizenry, after all. The city itself is quite peaceful, so it has become a rather popular destination. The right to live here is apparently traded at a high price."

In order to accommodate a large number of challengers, the city was well equipped with the facilities and infrastructure to serve their needs. Raiza may have been a tyrant, but he never raised a hand against the people of his city.

So for the ordinary residents, it was a comfortable environment.

"I suppose the citizens might look upon you as a villain who has come to disturb their peaceful lives."

"That's just a matter of perspective," Yogiri replied.

Whether or not Raiza was viewed as a benevolent ruler by the locals, the atrocities he had brought upon the rest of his lands knew no limits. From their viewpoints, Yogiri would be a hero.

"Allow me to give you a piece of advice," Mokomoko said. "Worrying about issues like that is significantly more human."

"I guess you're right." He had to agree with her, although the fact that he hadn't realized it on his own was concerning.

On the other hand, being trapped in another world wasn't exactly the right time to be worrying about such things. While developing himself to be more human was an important goal, he was in no position to go on a leisurely journey of self-discovery at the moment.

"Do you think they'll move away if I ask them to?"

"The confusion does seem to have died down a bit now."

As Yogiri was starting to think they would need to make a move, the crowd split to allow a group of well-groomed men and women to pass through. They lined up in front of him and dropped to their knees.

"We are the servants of Lord Raiza," one of the women said, speaking as their representative. They didn't pay the slightest attention to the fallen Sage, indicating that they had already given up on him. "The agreement for this fight was that the winner would take ownership of the Philosopher's Stone and the city. After consulting, we have decided that there is no doubting your victory."

"It's probably weird to be asking permission from you, but I guess you mean I'm allowed to take it?" Yogiri asked.

"That is correct. Since Lord Raiza is unable to protest, as the one responsible for the management and administration of this city, the duty of that announcement falls to me, the mayor. All things related to this place are now yours."

"I guess that's that, Mokobot. Can you call Euphemia?"

"I'm already on it."

Mokomoko's real body was at Tomochika's side. Delivering instructions to the half-demons waiting outside the city was a simple matter.

“Ha, ha ha ha. Lying on the ground like that, Raiza looks pathetic, doesn’t he?” a man called out from the crowd gathered around them. It seemed the shock was beginning to wear off. The man stepped up to the fallen Sage.

“Wait—”

Yogiri tried to stop him. He tried to tell the man that Raiza wasn’t exactly dead, but it was too late. The man was instantly blown backwards. Yogiri wasn’t quite sure what had happened, but the Sage had probably twitched his body to send off a shock wave somehow. The man struck a building before falling lifelessly to the ground.

“Umm... Are you not going to finish him off?” the mayor asked.

“You already admitted that I won, right? You can do whatever you want with him.”

The mayor seemed to want to complain, but Yogiri felt no obligation to strike his enemy down. He had already accomplished his objective, so there was no need for him to do more. From Yogiri’s perspective, the Sage was a rare breed of scum. But that didn’t mean he had the right to execute him while he was lying there helpless. That was someone else’s job now. For the moment, they would leave him there. If no one approached the dying Sage, there would be no danger. And if those present made sure to tell the others, it would be enough to keep them safe.

After a while, the half-demons arrived. Of course, they were currently disguised to hide their half-demon ancestry. Theodisia had once used magic to disguise herself, so this effect was likely something similar.

“I’m giving the city to these people,” Yogiri announced, then turned to the new arrivals. “Can you be their representative, Euphemia?”

“If no one else minds,” she replied.

There were no objections from the half-demons. Since they were a group consisting of multiple tribes, the power dynamic among them must have been complex, but it was hard to deny that Euphemia, as an Origin Blood, held the most power out of any of them. There wasn’t anyone more appropriate for the job.

“All right, then. We’ve finished the first stage of finding a home for the half-demons.”

Satisfied with the role he had played, it seemed like Yogiri intended to wash his hands of the matter after that.

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A few days passed after the fall of the City of the War God. There was a fair amount of chaos, but for the most part the transfer of power went smoothly. There was no one willing to challenge the person who had defeated Raiza, so those who were not satisfied to be ruled over by a group of mysterious strangers left the city behind.

Once it was widely known that Raiza was gone, the place could very well come under attack, but it would take some time for the rumors to spread. For now, the City of the War God was at peace.

Late one night, Yogiri and Tomochika were standing inside a stable.

"This one is...no good." Yogiri looked at the long teeth protruding from the horse's mouth. Even if horses had canine teeth, they shouldn't have been long enough to extend past their jaws. It seemed this horse had been turned into a vampire. And by doing so, it was physically much stronger than usual, not to mention the vampire who had turned it likely had a greater degree of control over it. It was hard to know if anyone other than a vampire could safely ride it.

"I was wondering why you suddenly showed up in my room and pulled me outside. Care to explain?" Tomochika asked.

"I'm getting sick of the crowds and figure it's time we go looking for the next Sage."

She was hoping you had come night crawling, Mokomoko interjected.

"Not even a little!"

Raiza's palace had been turned into the home base of the half-demons. Yogiri and Tomochika had been given rooms there.

"Can you even ride a horse?" she asked.

"I figured it couldn't be that hard, so I was just going to try it and see what happened. Is that unrealistic?"

"I'm pretty sure it's harder than driving a car."

The Dannoura School of Archery had a long history. Learning mounted combat was a natural part of their training regimen. Tomochika was highly experienced in horse riding, and that experience was enough to tell her that someone completely untrained had no business being on the back of such an animal.

"Oh, really?"

“Anyway, I let this slide a second ago, but we’re leaving now?”

“I don’t like it here.”

Up until this point, very few people had been aware of Yogiri’s abilities. But in this city, every single person recognized him as the most powerful being around. Having people constantly acting afraid of him, kissing his feet, ogling, flattering, and heaping praises on him made him feel uncomfortable.

“Are we allowed to just take these horses?”

“Everything in the city belongs to me, apparently.” After all, ownership had been officially given to him even though he had delegated the responsibility of running the place to the half-demons.

Taking one or two horses shouldn’t severely impact them. But are you sure it’s the best way for us to travel? the guardian spirit asked.

“I spent a few days searching for a car, but it doesn’t seem like there are any around here. There might be a way for us to get one, but I don’t feel like waiting and lazing around for that long.”

“Lazing around, huh? I guess that *is* what I’ve been doing...” For the past few days, Tomochika had lived a true life of luxury. She had enjoyed extravagant meals, magnificent baths, and had been treated like royalty everywhere she went.

You’ve been pretty useless, honestly.

Tomochika had no response to that.

“I’ve been looking into where we might be able to find another Sage,” Yogiri continued, “and I’ve gathered some supplies.”

“These are them?” his companion asked, looking at Yogiri’s backpack. Although he had obtained a new pack somewhere in the city, it didn’t seem big enough to carry enough supplies for a serious journey.

“It holds a lot more than it looks like. I don’t know how it works. Things like that seem pretty ordinary here, so I’m not overthinking it.”

“Okay, I’m not going to question it either, then!” Tomochika replied, quickly accepting his statement.

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In the end, they decided to travel by carriage. Riding a horse as a total novice would have been too difficult for Yogiri, and riding double wouldn’t have been much better. So they used one of the horses left behind by the

Invincible Battalion to pull a carriage for them.

The armor that the horse wore served to not only strengthen it but also healed its injuries and recovered its stamina, so it could pull the carriage for as long as they needed it to. Using the Enju-type robot, Mokomoko was driving up front. Tomochika had wondered if Yogiri would mind her using Enju in such a carefree way, but he hadn't said anything about it.

"This is a carriage for nobles, isn't it?" Tomochika asked. "Won't it stand out?"

"I figured it was more important for us to be comfortable." He had asked the mayor to prepare transportation for them, and this was what she had provided. "Let's start by heading east. There should be something that way." According to Yogiri's investigations, all of the Sages in the region were already dead.

"Wait, hold on!" Tomochika cried. "I feel like we're ignoring a lot of important things here!"

"Are we?"

"What about Carol and Ninomiya?!" Aside from Mokomoko, the two of them were the only ones in the carriage.

"Why would we bring them with us?"

"I'm surprised you can say that so bluntly! They're our classmates, aren't they?!"

"We couldn't stop them from following us, but that doesn't mean we have to go out of our way to stay with them."

"Really?!"

"They may not have any bad intentions, but you can't trust the Agency or the Institute." It was difficult for Tomochika to believe that those two were plotting something, but Yogiri felt differently. Tomochika didn't know what had happened in the past, but he simply couldn't trust the organizations their classmates belonged to.

"What about Euphemia and the others? We should at least say goodbye or something!" Now that the half-demons had found a home, it was unlikely they'd be interested in accompanying the two of them further, but they could have at least exchanged goodbyes.

"Sounds inconvenient."

"That's all you have to say?!"

"We didn't exactly hide the fact that we were leaving. I'm sure they'll

figure it out."

"What about Risley?! Didn't she have something she was going to ask you to do?"

Risley had originally introduced herself by asking Yogiri to marry her, but she'd clearly had some other favor she had wanted to ask.

"Oh, don't worry, I already got the Philosopher's Stone from her." Yogiri pulled a round, transparent stone from his backpack. It looked like a pretty rock, but the Philosopher's Stones contained enormous amounts of energy.

"Did you decide to do what she asked?" The child had wanted him to kill someone for her, but Yogiri hadn't seemed too thrilled by the prospect.

"What am I, a hitman?"

"Why did she give you the stone?"

"I said if I met the person somewhere out there, I'd deal with them however the situation dictated."

"So you didn't even promise her anything? I guess she couldn't have turned you down anyway, considering how much she likes you."

"Having someone you don't care about push their feelings on you is a nuisance."

"Could you try and sound a little less coldhearted?!"

"Come on, even I wouldn't say something like that to her face."

"I wonder..." Tomochika wasn't sure that he was capable of such tact.

"We needed the Philosopher's Stone no matter what. But I can't just be like, 'Okay, I'll go kill your sister for you,' can I?"

"Sister?"

"Yeah, Lain's younger sister. Though I guess she's a total stranger to Risley."

The child was a clone who had been made by Lain, but she hadn't inherited any of the Sage's memories. So the favor she was asking was technically none of her business.

"All I could say was that I'd think about it if and when I met her. She said that was fine and gave me the stone."

It wasn't much of a stretch to believe that Risley trusted him that much.

"Well, we've already left, so I guess it's too late to second-guess. Could you talk to me about these kinds of things beforehand next time?" As she said that, she realized that traveling with Yogiri had become something she took for granted.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

You’ve become awfully shameless, haven’t you? Mokomoko whispered.

“What’s to the east?” Tomochika quickly changed the subject, pretending she hadn’t heard the family ghost.

“There’s a Sage there acting as an emperor. Since his location is pretty much guaranteed, I figured it would be easy to go find him.”

“So, after the War God, we’re going for an emperor now. They really like their shady titles, don’t they?”

The Sages’ whereabouts were normally shrouded in mystery. Raiza had made his location public knowledge in order to invite challengers, but he was an exception. Clearly, this emperor was another.

With their next destination in mind, they continued their journey towards the empire in the east.

Chapter 17 — A Higher Being like an Ancient Dragon or Whatever

After destroying the mountaintop fortress, Hanakawa's group was walking through a cave on their way to the imperial capital. Although it would have been faster and safer to use the roads, the Master Oracle's prophecy had led them here instead.

"You really could do this all by yourself, couldn't you?" Hanakawa commented, watching Ragna.

The enormous cavern, illuminated by their magic light, was filled with monsters. But the creatures posed no threat at all, as whenever something approached them, Ragna would dispatch it with ease.

The young man didn't possess any particular ability that made him stand out; he was just very strong. So even though Hanakawa was once again walking at the front as bait, he wasn't in any real danger.

"Ah, that must be it," he commented. "Fighting with such an aura wrapped around you truly smacks of being a protagonist."

Ragna's aura protected him, enhanced his sword attacks, and at times even fired off on its own. That was his method of fighting.

"What's an aura?" Ragna asked, stepping up to join Hanakawa after cutting down another group of monsters.

Hanakawa's classmates were waiting a little ways back. They were still determined to carry out the pointless Hanakawa-as-bait plan.

"Uhh, it's the thing hovering around your body."

"Oh, that's nothing impressive. It's just basic healthy living. Everyone in my village is like that, remember? If you breathe with a certain rhythm, your body gets warm, so maybe it's like steam or something?"

"I don't think you can call that just 'steam.'"

Ordinary monsters were annihilated merely by touching the aura, so it was obviously something special, but Ragna seemed to truly believe that it wasn't.

“Hey, piggy, go left.” With the monsters blocking their progress now vanquished, the Master Oracle Shigehito Mitadera gave further instructions.

“That is easy to say, but the path only proceeds in a single direction. All that stands to our left is a wall. You don’t expect me to burst through the rock or anything, do you?”

“Actually, that sounds fun. Try it,” Rei Kushima, the Femme Fatale suggested, her interest piqued.

“Curse my foolish tongue!”

“If you don’t hurry up, the bug in your ear will explode.”

Within Hanakawa’s ear was an object fashioned by the Creator, Akinobu Marufuji. It was set to explode if he should ever disobey their orders.

“Fine, I’ll go!” He turned to the wall and ran. Luckily, he possessed Healing Magic, so if he were to injure himself, he’d still ultimately be fine. “It will hurt, though...”

Preparing himself for the worst, he threw his body into the wall and passed right through it effortlessly. There was no impact. With nothing to catch him, his momentum threw him forward, and he landed, sliding facedown along the ground.

The magic light followed Hanakawa into the hidden passageway, illuminating the space around him. It was huge. In front of him were a number of close-built stone structures. It was obviously a city, but there were no signs of life within. How long had it stood there? The aged buildings riddled with cracks spoke of untold years of abandonment. Looking up, the ceiling was so far away that their light couldn’t reach it, so it was impossible to gauge how high up the cavern went.

Turning back, Hanakawa saw that behind him was a wall of solid stone, glowing where he had passed through it.

From within that light, Shigehito’s voice called out, “It’s an ancient city. One of the materials for the Omega Blade is in there. And once we get out, we’ll be pretty close to the capital, so we’re killing two birds with one stone.”

Shigehito’s class was Master Oracle, so his special ability must have told him that. His Book of Prophecy was like a handbook or a strategy guide to this world.

“This is a shortcut, then, is it not? So why are none of you coming in?” Seeing that no one was following him into the city, Hanakawa began to get a bad feeling.

“Both the shortcut and the material will require a bit of work to reach.”

“Ha, ha ha. You mean to tell me that I must solve the riddle of the ancient ruins to gain passage and treasure? But doing so without any hints is too much even for me.”

Still, if they wanted him to do this on his own, he had no way of refusing them.

“Don’t worry; it’s coming.”

“What are you talking—”

The sudden appearance of a distant presence rendered Hanakawa speechless. Although he couldn’t see anything yet, the distant sound of beating wings provided him with an instinctive realization that the ruler of this place now approached.

“Wh-What is that?!” Hanakawa was fast. Recognizing instantly that he was in danger, he ran straight for the glowing wall. But as one would expect of any wall, he merely bounced off it, falling backwards into a heap. “Wait, what is going on?!”

“Sorry, it’s a one-way door,” Shigehito replied.

“Then how are we talking through it?!” Jumping back to his feet, Hanakawa felt the wall with his hands. It was solid. It was hard to believe he had run through it moments before. “Hey! Something is coming!”

“Well, of course. They’re ancient ruins, so naturally they’ll have a guardian of some sort.”

The sound of wings was growing louder, sending a chill through him. A slow, creeping despair was filling the air as something landed behind him.

“I get the feeling I’d be better off not turning to look!” But he turned anyway. In a way, it was even more terrifying not knowing what was there.

It was watching Hanakawa from atop one of the decrepit buildings. Its body was covered in glittering black scales, supported by four powerful limbs, and it boasted a pair of wings whose magnificent size could be recognized even as they sat folded on its back. Its reptilian head sported horns and a jaw filled with razor-sharp fangs.

Hanakawa screamed, falling onto the ground. “A d-d-dragon?!”

His Discernment skill showed nothing, which meant that its stats must have been hidden, but one hardly needed such a skill to tell that this monster was anything but ordinary. It was like a living disaster—a being far beyond the potential of mankind against whom the idea of fighting seemed absurd.

Hanakawa was paralyzed. The sight of the creature was enough to freeze the breath in his lungs.

"Mortal one, what business brings you to this holy—"

Its head suddenly fell from its shoulders. Hanakawa scuttled backwards with a yelp as the dragon's disembodied face struck the ground in front of him.

"Ha ha, you're exaggerating, Hanakawa."

At some point, Ragna had appeared beside him. The oppressive atmosphere that had frozen him in place melted instantly.

"Uhh, did you perhaps slay the dragon?"

"Oh, come on, that's not a dragon. That was just a big lizard. There are tons of these living around our village."

"Huh? Wasn't it talking, though? Something like 'mortal one'? It sounded like something a higher being like an ancient dragon or whatever would say."

"Ah, I suppose you wouldn't know since people in the city only see the meat at the end of the day. They do talk sometimes. They like to act as if they're a lot more important than they are. It's kind of a weak tactic, but I suppose it is a sign of intelligence in its own way."

"So, you kill them for meat even though they can talk?" Hanakawa was a little turned off by that.

"I mean, it is food, and it sells pretty well. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel at all bad about killing something that can talk, but that's what it means to hunt animals."

I see. It's still a bit unclear, but it appears he is the naive country hero archetype. In that case, no matter how much knowledge he is provided with, he will continue to have these kinds of misunderstandings about the wider world.

It seemed like too much work to try to correct the young man's misconceptions, so Hanakawa decided to treat the situation in the simplest way he could.

Well, he is honest and straightforward and reasonably considerate, so I'm sure he'll protect me!

Under the circumstances, Ragna could be considered Hanakawa's lifeline. Without the young man, he would have died long ago.

"You're pretty good, Ragna," Shigehito commented as the other three finally arrived. "Well, that does it for the Blackgleam Dragon's horn. Can

you cut it off for us?"

Ragna easily separated the horn from the decapitated head.

"I suppose that horn will become the blade of the sword," Hanakawa mused. "Do we really need it?"

Even without the Omega Blade, Ragna's aura seemed more than capable of cutting through anything with an ordinary sword.

"I suppose we need the proof that we killed it too. We should find the Blackgleam Dragon's jewel," Shigehito said before turning to Hanakawa. "Hey, piggy, go get it."

"But where would I even look?"

"It's a jewel, right?" Akinobu replied. "Why not try checking where you always find the 'family jewels'?"

Although he knew Akinobu was only messing with him, Hanakawa couldn't disobey. He reluctantly approached the corpse that had fallen from its perch.

"What's that face for? Didn't you come with us so you could do this kind of stuff?"

I came because you forced me to! Of course, he couldn't say that out loud. "Ha, ha ha ha! How exciting! I do love this kind of dirty work!"

Hanakawa approached the dragon's privates. Although it had been acting like some kind of higher being, it still had the body of a reptile, so it should have had some way of expelling waste. Naturally, that part of the body was filthy, and its stench filled the air around him.

I will definitely, definitely kill them! Someday! Definitely!

The jewel turned out to be in the dragon's hand.

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Akinobu Marufuji, the Creator, considered himself to be the strongest. His Gift allowed him to create all sorts of creatures. While he couldn't create life from absolutely nothing, there was no doubt that it was an extraordinary power.

Akinobu's ability was able to give inanimate objects souls. He couldn't use it on animals, but it did work on plants and dead bodies. Basically, it wouldn't work on anything that already had a soul.

Akinobu himself didn't really believe in the existence of a soul per se, but

looking at it in that way made his abilities easier to explain. Whatever he created would follow his orders. He could give his creations all sorts of abilities and so indirectly had access to those powers himself. If there was a limit to his skill, it would be that he had to physically touch a thing to give it life, but even that was a restriction he could bypass by acting through the creatures he had already created.

For example, he could create something like a tree and have its roots spread as far as he wished. As long as he was touching the thing he created, he could use his own powers through it. There were limits to the size, speed, or number of his creations, but those could be overcome by continuing to strengthen his Gift.

In Akinobu's mind, he would someday be able to rule the world.

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Shigehito Mitadera, the Master Oracle, considered himself to be the strongest.

He could see fate itself. No matter how high a person's stats were or how powerful their abilities, if they couldn't see the future then someday they would fail. If they wielded their power aimlessly, they would eventually come across someone stronger and be defeated. On top of that, being strong didn't mean that things would always go their way. There were even cases where that strength would be the ultimate cause of their failure.

In order for someone to accomplish their objective, they needed information... What to fight and defeat and what needed to be left alone. Where to go, what to get, who to meet. Shigehito's Book of Prophecy told him exactly how to accomplish his goals, and the exact actions he needed to take. As it took the form of a book, it couldn't contain everything, but it did have the minimum information necessary to proceed. It took some practice to figure out how to read it properly, but Shigehito was already in the process of mastering that.

By deciding on an objective, the Book of Prophecy gave him the knowledge that he needed to accomplish it. Currently, his objective was to wipe out the Sages and take over the world. Of course, in a straight fight, he couldn't beat Akinobu or Ragna, nor could he beat the Sage who had given him the Gift in the first place. But being unable to defeat her merely meant

that he couldn't use his Gift directly against her. The book would still be able to give him the information he needed to succeed. So, while a Creator couldn't triumph in that regard, there was a chance that a Master Oracle could.

Shigehito was gathering the resources, both human and not, to do just that. Luckily, it didn't seem like they had any sort of time limit. Following the Book of Prophecy, proceeding carefully forward, made it seem like an achievable goal.

In Shigehito's mind, control of information was the same as control of the world.

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Rei Kushima, the Femme Fatale, considered herself to be the strongest.

Her power was to evaluate the usefulness of the men she met and manipulate them accordingly. In short, she could recognize those who had some worth and seduce them. Neither the Creator, Akinobu Marufuji, nor the Master Oracle, Shigehito Mitadera, realized that they were under her control. At some point they had simply lost the ability to disobey her, and their desires had naturally begun to coincide with hers.

Shigehito had originally had no desire to defeat the Sages and conquer the world. That was the direction Rei had sent him in. There was no particular reason for it either. She had just wanted to test how far she could push the men she ensnared.

She was quite excited to see how things would go. If all she wanted was to live in peace and safety, that was easy enough. But she wasn't interested in a tranquil, boring life. She had no idea how she could possibly get back to her home world, so she decided to live a life that was as flashy and thrilling as possible.

In Rei's mind, there was nothing more appealing than a life of excitement.

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After passing through the ancient city, Hanakawa's group ascended a frustratingly long staircase, which eventually emerged into a forest on the surface. The exit disappeared without a trace once they'd passed through it,

so it seemed to be another one-way door.

Leaving the forest behind, they immediately found a road to a walled city not far off. It was the imperial capital of the Empire of Ent. Although the seemingly endless fortifications highlighted the enormous size of the city, Hanakawa couldn't help but feel disappointed. It looked just like every other city he had seen here.

"I was hoping, after hearing this was an island country in the east, that it would have more of a Japanese aesthetic, but it doesn't seem much different from what we've encountered before."

He was walking ahead of the group, as always. He hadn't been given any specific instructions, so he was just heading towards the buildings. There was no guard posted at the city gate, so they were able to walk in without confrontation.

"All right, we made it to the capital. Now what?"

"Next is the adventurer's guild," Shigehito said, looking through his Book of Prophecy. "We'll need the Blackgleam Dragon's jewel there."

"I see. I was unaware that such an institution existed," Hanakawa replied. There had been a similarly named organization in the capital of Manii, but it had only sold entry rights to the Underworld, so it seemed functionally different.

Shigehito's book had a map in it, and by following it they were able to reach their destination quickly. The inside looked like an ordinary pub. There were a number of tables, and along one wall were posted numerous job requests. Customers were happily drinking away even in the middle of the day, so it seemed like the proprietors were running a fairly successful business.

"It's remarkable how much this place matches the template!" Hanakawa gushed. "So, have we come here with the intention of registering with the guild? Actually, no matter how I look, I am already level ninety-nine! I'm sure they'll be quite shocked when they do the standard stat check on me!"

In spite of having been dragged there against his will, he was still somewhat looking forward to it. Ever since coming to this world, he had been suffering nonstop. No matter how ordinary or clichéd it might be, he was looking forward to a good experience for once.

"Sorry, but Ragna's the one who's getting that experience," Shigehito interrupted.

“Oh... Ah, so that is why we procured the jewel! As he goes to register for the guild, he will say, ‘Oh, by the way, I defeated this on my way here.’ And when he shows them the jewel, they’ll all be shocked!”

This was still an interesting development as far as Hanakawa was concerned. It was unfortunate that he himself wouldn’t be the center of attention, but watching it happen firsthand would be good enough.

“All I have to do is register?” Ragna asked.

“That’s right. Once you do, we can make money by defeating monsters and the like,” Shigehito said, urging him forward, though Ragna didn’t quite seem to know what was going on.

Ohh! Perhaps it is a bit late, but I’m starting to get excited! I am going to become an official adventurer!

The reception desk was at the far end of the building, so they had to walk through the bar to get there. As they did, they passed by several drunks, and as if it were entirely natural, one of those men stuck his leg out to block the way.

Hanakawa immediately felt moved. Delinquent adventurers were picking a fight with the newcomers. Such a cliché was something that he had never expected to see with his own eyes.

The lanky hoodlum wore leather pants and a studded jacket. He had such a picture-perfect “punk” look that it had to have been on purpose. Three beautiful women were sitting with him, so he likely wasn’t the low-class thug he appeared, but it was hard to overcome that first impression of him being a weakling.

“Hey, hey, hey! Never seen you lot before, have I? Who d’you think you are, walkin’ by us without even saying hello?”

“Hello!” Ragna greeted the man politely, failing to understand the situation.

“Yes, hello... The hell do you mean, ‘hello’?! You an idiot or somethin’?”

“Then what do you want?”

“You’re planning on registerin’ with the guild, yeah? I’ll be the judge of that,” the punk answered, standing up. He was just as tall and lanky as expected, still giving the impression of being fairly weak.

“Judge? What do you mean?” Ragna asked.

“If you want to join the guild, you’ll have to beat me first!” He brought his fists up in a guard stance. And then, making the sound effects himself, he

began swinging punches at the air. He looked amusingly pathetic, but Hanakawa decided to inspect his abilities anyway.

The man was level ten. For Ragna, who was over level fifty thousand, he could be easily beaten with a single finger.

"Oh, Yoshifumi, would you stop it?"

"Come on, let's just drink!"

"Who cares about some newbies?"

The women he was with were clearly fed up with him. It seemed this was a regular routine, but this Yoshifumi was so weak that any "newbie" would have no problem taking him on.

"Well, that's a problem. I don't know how I feel about fighting you."

"Don't think about it too hard, Ragna," Shigehito urged. "How about you just knock him to the floor? That should be good enough."

If they were planning on registering with the guild, killing or severely injuring this guy wasn't a good idea.

"Okay. I just need to knock him over?"

"Huh? Sure, if you can knock me down, you win!"

In spite of the threatening behavior, Hanakawa wasn't the least bit scared. The fight had been decided long before any blows were struck. The actual fight was just for show.

"Okay, here I go."

"Bring it!"

Ragna's head was promptly blown clean off his shoulders. Hanakawa had no idea what he had just witnessed. His companion's neck was suddenly gushing blood, painting the ceiling red. The headless body fell over, spilling a bloody mess onto the floor.

"Come on, Yoshifumi. The receptionist is going to get mad at you again."

"Cleaning up after you do that is a lot of work!"

"This is why we don't get any new members!"

Yoshifumi took a seat again, wiping off his fists as the women complained. "Yo, Sage candidates. Sorry for introducing myself so late. I'm the Emperor of Ent, the Sage Yoshifumi. Nice to meet ya."

"Wh-Why... Why would the emperor... Why would a *Sage* be in a place like this?" Shigehito was completely dumbstruck.

"And how did the hoodlum win?!" Hanakawa added. "This is nothing like the template at all!"

To defeat the Sages, you need the World Sword Omega Blade! Your main objective in Ent is to obtain the World Sword...but beware! The Sage Yoshifumi is also there! If you encounter him before obtaining the sword, you will be wiped out! However, unlike most Sages, Yoshifumi acts as the Emperor of Ent, so his area of movement is fairly restricted. If you are careful, you should be able to avoid him!

Hanakawa remembered the words of the Book of Prophecy.

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Chapter 18 — Interlude: That's a Pretty Strange Way of Looking at Things

When Ryouko woke up in the morning, she saw Carol hiding behind the plant in the corner of her room. Ryouko didn't want to believe that her classmate could even consider that to be "hiding," but given the way she tried to shrink herself down and hold her breath, it was hard to call it anything else.

"You noticed me?" Carol finally gave up after she realized that Ryouko was staring directly at her. "I was hoping to surprise you while you were still asleep."

"I'm sure it's not what you planned, but don't worry, I'm plenty surprised."

"I guess it was no good. I have a skill for hiding, so I thought I might be able to make it work."

"Even if it made you totally invisible, you'd still be given away by your bright red outfit."

Carol was wearing her vivid ninja uniform. Donning clothes suitable for one's class enhanced one's abilities, but in her case the combination wasn't exactly compatible.

"So, do you need something?" Ryouko asked.

"Did you notice that Takatou left?"

"Oh, did he?"

"He and Tomochika took off last night. Risley is throwing a fit over it."

"So, he left us behind."

"Well, it's not like he had any reason to take us with him, but his way of cutting us off like that is still kind of amusing."

"Then what now?" As Ryouko asked that, she realized it was something that really didn't have anything to do with Carol. Ryouko had completely accepted her as a companion along the way, but they hadn't even been friends before; just two girls who happened to be in the same class.

"I'm going to follow them. What about you?"

“Why? What point is there in watching him now?” They had no way of contacting home or getting back. There was no reason to continue their mission to observe him.

“Why? I mean, because I don’t want to die.”

In fairness, staying by Yogiri’s side *was* the safest place they could be. This world was overflowing with danger. Even if they tried to hide and live a quiet life, there was no telling when some powerful being like a Sage would waltz in and end it all.

“Those two are looking for a way home,” Ryouko mentioned.

“Yeah, but I suspect he wouldn’t take us back with him.”

“No, I think we’d be fine on that front. If we were sticking with them, Dannoura wouldn’t let him abandon us.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping that as well.”

“Don’t you think if they manage to get back, it would be safer for us to stay in this world?” Ryouko asked.

“That’s a strange way of thinking about things,” Carol replied.

But Ryouko couldn’t help feeling that Carol was underestimating the being that was Yogiri Takatou. It was true that this world was full of danger, but wasn’t Yogiri far more terrifying than any of that?

“Well, in any case, there is no reason for us to stay here.”

They were in their current location strictly because they had been following Yogiri. If he was gone, there was no reason for them to live with the half-demons. They weren’t especially safe there, after all. In fact, it could be said they were in even more danger. They had no idea how long they could hide the fact that the half-demons had made a home there.

“Hey, show me that thing again,” Carol instructed, pointing at the smartphone on Ryouko’s pillow. Although the battery had almost died, she had been able to recharge it by borrowing Yogiri’s makeshift charger. The device had been designed to recharge handheld gaming consoles, but it possessed an interchangeable cable to allow for a variety of uses.

“It appears they’re heading east,” Ryouko informed her friend, checking the tool on her phone that was designed to monitor Yogiri. It could tell what direction he was in and provided information on the state of his seals.

“With your smartphone, we can get a general idea of what direction to go in, so we should probably be able to catch up. Why don’t we go together?” Carol suggested.

“I suppose. Either way, staying here doesn’t make much sense.”

Maybe by making a move of her own, she’d figure out what she ultimately wanted to do. Ryouko decided to adopt a more optimistic outlook.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Euphemia! Yogiri’s gone!” Risley shouted, bursting into Euphemia’s office.

“Yes, I heard the mayor prepared a carriage for him, so I figured they decided to go out,” the vampire replied, lifting her gaze from the documents on her desk.

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“If they took a carriage, that means they aren’t coming back, right?!”

“That is possible, but we don’t really have a right or reason to keep him here.”

“W-Well, that’s true, but...”

Risley seemed to deflate. Euphemia was, of course, correct. Yogiri and Tomochika had helped Theodisia at the tower and then helped the half-demons to secure a home. Whether that was kindness on their part or they were simply following their whims, there was no reason for the pair to stay with the half-demons forever. They had their own objectives.

“You already asked him your favor, right?”

“Yes, but he didn’t promise anything.”

Risley’s original form, the Sage Lain, had a twin sister named Seyla. Lain’s last request had been for Yogiri to kill her sibling. Risley herself didn’t care much about Lain or her sister, having never met either of them. She and Lain were completely different people. Why would Lain have wanted her younger sister dead? She had no way of knowing.

“Takatou was quite surprised, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he made a face like he thought I was crazy. His biggest problem was that I didn’t even know why Lain wanted her to be killed.”

Seyla had apparently acquired immortality in a different way than Lain had. It was no wonder the former Sage had wanted Yogiri’s help with killing her, but there was no information about why she wanted her dead in the first place.

“Well, that is only natural. You can’t just ask him to kill someone like that.”

“All Lain said is that I’d know when I saw her. I wonder what she meant.”

“It’s possible it was just a plan to guide you forward by stimulating your curiosity.”

Lain hadn’t tried to force her clone to do anything, so it was well within Risley’s power to ignore the request. But with her deep-seated affection for Yogiri, she had wanted to meet him regardless, and since she had met him anyway, she had used the passing on of Lain’s last request as an excuse to talk to him. It was likely just as Lain had planned.

“Did you give them the Philosopher’s Stone?”

“Yes. There’s not much I can do with it myself.” For a Sage, it might have been useful, but Risley wasn’t a Sage, and she possessed no particular powers

of her own. A Philosopher's Stone was meaningless to her. "He said that if he met Seyla, he'd think about it."

Risley didn't know exactly where Lain's sister was, but she had told Yogiri that, as far as she knew, she was with the Sage Van. Then again, they had no idea where Van was, so it wasn't particularly useful information. That said, Yogiri was searching for Sages already, so there was a possibility that he would come across her on his own at some point. That was her only hope.

"Then didn't you successfully complete your objective?" Euphemia asked.

"Yes, but...but...but I don't like it!"

"Is that so? He already rejected you, so I don't think pressing him any further would be a good idea."

"Maybe I should have tried a more gradual approach after all."

"I haven't seen Takatou show an interest in anyone other than Dannoura, so I suspect no matter what you did, it would have produced the same results."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm rather confident in my own appearance and attract more than my fair share of stares from all sorts of men, but I never got that from Takatou." In spite of Euphemia's words, she didn't give off an arrogant impression. She was simply saying what she felt was the truth.

"If even *you* couldn't catch his eye, what am *I* supposed to do?!"

"In the end, I believe that such romantic feelings stem from spending time together." *So give up,* Euphemia meant. But that's not how Risley took it.

"Then that's the answer!"

"I don't know what you mean. Are you planning on following Takatou again?"

"Yes! There's nothing else I want to do!" For Risley, who had suddenly woken up just as she was with no memories, her feelings for Yogiri were an irreplaceable part of her.

"Understood. Then please allow me to go with you."

"Huh? Aren't you in charge of the city?"

"Most administrative matters are being handled by the city council already. I'm sure Theo will be more than capable of acting as a representative for the half-demons."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course. Do you really think you’d be able to track those two by yourself?”

“I guess that’s true. I’ve just been relying on you the whole time, haven’t I?”

“Before I am a half-demon, I am your loyal servant.”

The sentiment may have been a compulsion placed upon Euphemia when she had first been turned into a vampire, but Risley’s feelings for Yogiri weren’t all that different. Those were simply the emotions they felt, so regardless of the reasons for it, Risley figured it was okay.

“Then let’s go!”

And so they set off to meet Yogiri once more.

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MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY
IS SO OVERPOWERED,
NO ONE IN THIS OTHER WORLD
STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

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Child of Taboo

It was a great war, shaking the foundation of the world. A war upon which humanity's very existence had been staked. A battle between those who controlled the majority of the planet (the modern humans who ruled through intellect and science) and those who worked from the darkness to overthrow it all with mystery and the supernatural.

Of course, ordinary people had no knowledge of these events. It was something only known by those who lived on the underside, within the shadows of the world. Only a precious few in the religious community were aware of it.

The battle was meant to decide everything. It was the kind of war that would only end when one side had been completely wiped out. For the majority, that would have seemed unreasonable. While they remained blissfully unaware, one small group was fighting for the continued survival of the entire race. But there was nothing they could do about it. The threats lurking in the darkness were imperceptible to most.

It was hard to call it anything but despair. The infamous Dark Gods, Evil Gods, and Great Demon, beings that seemed at home in fairy tales and myths, had begun a simultaneous all-out assault on the world, as if they had planned it together.

Humanity was quickly pushed onto the defensive. Until that point, they had been able to resist these dark forces because the attacks had been sporadic and incidental. But humans were weak, fragile things. Only by gathering in large numbers and squeezing out as much knowledge as possible could they just barely keep the evil under control.

Someone must have appeared to take control of that evil. Those dark beings had no reason or will to cooperate with each other. They were ruled only by their whims, sharing no commonalities in disposition or physical form. The appearance of one who could unite them was enough to spell the end.

And yet one could say that humanity did well. They didn't give up.

Although there was nothing they could do but struggle in vain, delaying that final hour only slightly, they fought with unparalleled conviction, determined to be victorious in the end. And their futile struggles, which did nothing more than buy them time, ultimately bore fruit.

In a baffling turn of events, the battle suddenly came to an end. For the humans, on the brink of annihilation, it was cause for rejoicing. The war that had been waged without the knowledge of the general public came to an end with most of the population none the wiser. Few ever knew that their world had been perched on the edge of the abyss.

But even those who had been fighting to save it all had no idea what had actually happened. *How* had they won? Why had the dark powers stopped their assault? Why had they suddenly disappeared?

They would not discover the answers to these questions for some time.

◇ ◇ ◇

A man wearing the robes of a Buddhist priest was walking through the mountains under the light of the sun. His name was Dougen, a man in the prime of his life, and he had become a central figure in Japan's fight against the darkness.

He doubted that the fight had truly come to an end. He couldn't celebrate the fact that humanity had avoided destruction. He knew full well how fickle the dark beings were. It wasn't impossible that they had, for some reason, simply given up a fight they were all but certain to win. But if that decision had been based on a whim, they could just as easily resume their attack at any time.

There was no way of predicting their movements. That's what Dougen had learned from his battles against them. They were merciless and cruel, toying with humanity, tearing them apart, and bringing them to ruin. But in the same way, depending on their mood, they would occasionally hold back, letting the humans go unharmed. Dougen's expectations had been betrayed plenty of times. He had personally been shown a humiliating amount of mercy in the past.

Was it because they now had a leader? If that leader was involved in the current ceasefire, it was possible that it was a trap or scheme of some sort. They couldn't afford to relax just because the previous fight was over.

Dougen searched for signs of the dark powers. He had found one such Great Demon that had been attacking Japan. That discovery had brought him here. He had sensed an unearthly force coming from these mountains. Looking at maps of the area, he saw that there was nothing of particular note in the region, but being in the mountains, there were any number of places a Great Demon could hide itself. There was nothing to do but go there and investigate.

When he arrived, he could immediately tell that something was wrong. After all, the army had been deployed to the surrounding area to guard against any intruders.

I suppose I did hear rumors of villages passing down secret rituals, he thought. He figured this must have been one of those places. Dougen had a thorough knowledge of the hidden side of the world. He was well aware that the government was keeping the existence of certain villages secret, and although he didn't know why they were being concealed, he didn't mind being in the dark. By the unbroken vigil of these villages, something had been safely locked away since ancient times, which meant they were doing well. There was no need for him to intrude.

But this time it was different. If there was a Great Demon hiding there that could potentially destroy Japan, or even the entire world, he couldn't simply let things lie. Sneaking into the village was easy enough. His opponents were soldiers who had rarely been required to kill others. Passing through without alerting them was no issue for him.

Within the mountains, he found a compact settlement. It seemed like a wholly unremarkable rural village—a poor community that had been stopped in time at the beginning of the twentieth century. If it continued this way, it might eventually develop some sort of cultural value, but right now it was merely old.

They are clearly isolated from the outside world. If I'm not careful, contact with the residents could mean trouble.

Dougen watched the locals from his hiding spot in the trees as they worked in the fields and orchards. In such an isolated place, they would recognize Dougen as an outsider in an instant. He decided it would be best to try to sneak in under the cover of night.

There was a larger building in the center of the settlement. Its architectural style was unfamiliar to him, but it likely served some sort of religious

function. He could feel an unnatural presence or aura emanating from the building. If he wanted to reach it, he would need to pass through the open fields.

If he'd only had some sort of concealing magic, he might have been able to manage it, but Dougen's abilities were specialized for combat. In other words, it was highly unlikely that he could get through unnoticed. So he decided to turn back. But when he did, he found a young man standing in front of him, wearing overalls and holding a hoe, looking like he had just returned from working in the fields.

"Wait, I don't want to fight," the man said as he saw Dougen instinctively draw his weapon, a vajra. "I couldn't beat you anyway. Judging from your appearance, you're from the mountains, right? There's only one reason for a stranger to show up here these days. I'll take you there, so please put that away."

Feeling no hostility from the man, Dougen sheathed his weapon.

"By the way," the local continued, "there's no way you could have snuck into the village. Everyone knew you were here from the moment you passed the barrier. So the only options you have are to kill everyone on your way to your target or let me guide you."

Dougen accepted the man's offer. "Please guide me there, then."

His primary objective was to determine the source of the unnatural presence, but he had no interest in gratuitous killing. His appearance as a Buddhist priest was no more than a show, but he still had respect for the teachings he was mimicking.

Dougen followed the young man through the fields and into the center of the settlement. The structure was much larger than it appeared from a distance. It had such an imposing presence that it felt like the village had been created for the sake of this one building. While it seemed to be a shrine, it didn't appear to have any connection to Shinto. The cylindrical structure seemed somehow more foreign than that.

"You can go in from there," the man said, pointing to a door. Clearly, he didn't intend to accompany the stranger.

Climbing the stone steps, Dougen pushed the door open and went inside. The interior was built like a monastery. It had wooden floors and a high ceiling. Just as it appeared from the outside, the inside was a cylinder.

Lining the edge of the space were numerous candlesticks, casting a dim

light over the room. Despite the light coming from the door behind him and the plentiful candles around him, the illumination they offered didn't reach the center of the room.

Dougen took out a penlight and pointed it into the darkness. As he'd expected, the light vanished before reaching the center of the room. It seemed there was some sort of barrier set up there, a boundary dividing the center of the cylinder from the exterior. He could feel a faint unearthly energy emanating from within. Just as he'd thought, there was indeed something inside, and it was most definitely doing *something*. Something that had required the dark beings to stop fighting just before they had won. There was a distinct possibility that this being would be its own disaster for humanity.

Steeling himself, Dougen stepped into the darkness.

His breath stopped.

What is this?

His sense of time became vague, as did his sense of up and down. He couldn't tell if he was even standing anymore. His vision warped and flickered, preventing him from seeing anything around him. But that was probably for the best. He instinctively recognized that if he looked upon what was sitting before him, he would go insane.

Whatever was down there with him was pure terror. He could only describe it as all the evils of the universe distilled into a single place. The Dark Gods that individually threatened the world were only a part of what he was witnessing. It was as if they had been condensed, mixed together, and packed tightly into this space. Just by existing here, they could likely curse the entire world. If they were to be released, humanity would be corrupted in an instant.

But to Dougen, that was all trivial.

Something is here. That horrifying, calamitous presence was no more than a cover. It was only there to keep something even worse concealed. Dougen's instincts screamed at him to stop. What point was there in confirming what lay even farther ahead? All that remained was despair. It was a dead end, something that no human could face or stop. What would he gain by looking inside?

But Dougen couldn't help wanting to know. Ignoring this thing and turning back would have been the smart choice; he knew that. He didn't know why he couldn't walk away, but whatever was there was now within

the barrier. Presumably, the village existed to keep it sealed beneath. If so, he should just leave it to them.

But then what? Could he live the rest of his life not knowing what was beyond? What existed in this place was the ultimate power. Whether good or bad, what was wrong with wanting to see such insanity with his own eyes?

Dougen crawled forward. He couldn't stand anymore, but he still understood which direction he had to go in. As long as he could move his hands and feet, he would eventually reach it.

Suddenly, a clear voice called out, causing him to stop. "You must be quite passionate to have made it this far. I thought you guys hated us, but I guess that's not the case." It was coming from in front of him, from the heart of the darkness. "But maybe you should stop there. If you keep going, you'll die, so why don't we go somewhere else?"

Everything abruptly turned white. With his eyes accustomed to the deep darkness, the sudden sunlight blinded him. He realized that he was lying on the stone ground outside the shrine.

Once his eyes adjusted to the light, he found a woman sitting on the stone steps in front of him. She had an elegant air about her and was wearing a disheveled kimono. Although he had never seen her before, Dougen immediately recognized that this woman was the Great Demon he had been searching for.

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“No need to lie there like that. Come on over.”

She smiled as she spoke, but Dougen felt strangely ill at ease. Standing face-to-face in broad daylight with an enemy he had only ever confronted in the dead of night struck him as humorous.

This woman was an enemy. His mission was to defeat her. But after seeing what was inside that building, he didn’t care anymore. She likely intended to tell him about what lay within. That was more than he could have asked for. So while he found it unpleasant to do as she instructed, he admittedly couldn’t talk to her while lying there on the ground.

With a click of his tongue, he got up and took a seat beside her.

“It’s a baby.”

“What is?”

“You’re curious about what’s in there, right? I’m saying it’s a baby.”

What on earth were they planning by locking up a baby in that temple?

“No, that’s not correct. We didn’t lock it in there.”

Either his thoughts had shown on his face or she had somehow read his mind. Either way, she answered his unspoken question.

“I’m sure that’s what you were going to ask. I’ll tell you, so please be satisfied with that and go home.”

She seemed to intend for this to be a lecture. That was fine with Dougen. He wasn’t even sure what he should ask.

“First, although it’s just a baby, the people of this village call it Lord Okakushi, the Taker of Souls.”

“Was it a child who was taken, then?” Stories of young children disappearing were commonly linked to supernatural events.

“No, the child is the one making others disappear. And it is quite the strange power that does so as well. As far as we can tell, it is the power to make anything and everything disappear.”

By “making things disappear,” she must have meant it was killing them, but “anything and everything” seemed like an awfully wide scope for such an ability.

“I don’t know its true form,” she continued, “but it lives for about a hundred years before dying and returning in a new form. When the previous incarnation dies, a new one is created. That’s what this child is.”

“And why have you taken an interest in it?”

“Because if left alone, it’s not only humans or the supernatural who will

be affected—the *entire* world will die. We're protecting it all, you know? And you wanted to ask why we stopped fighting, right? That's the reason. What we want is a world where we can walk around and live freely. There's no point in obtaining that if the world dies in the process."

If what she was saying was true, it made sense for them to have changed their priorities. If the world they wanted to rule was going to be destroyed anyway, there was no point in defeating humanity.

"You might think we should simply kill off such an annoying creature, but it retaliates against anyone who tries. No one can beat it."

Dougen found that hard to believe. It was impossible for him to fathom that the infamous monsters he knew would be helpless against a single baby.

"And babies don't really think much, right?" she went on. "So we have no way of knowing when and where it's going to use its power. There's always a possibility it could destroy the world just because it's hungry."

Babies were beings that could do nothing but cry about things they wanted and things they didn't like. If a life form in that limited mental state had a power that could affect the entire world, the implications were terrifying.

"That's why we're risking our lives to take care of it. I know I said it was an invincible monster, but it's vulnerable at the moment it's born. So we've been keeping it in a dream state since birth."

"A dream where it has everything it could ever want?" Dougen asked.

"Very close. But that would just make it grow up to be spoiled. What we're doing is hiding him within the dream world. If by a one-in-a-million chance it turns its powers against that world, it won't even know that ours exists. No matter how powerful it is, there's no way it can kill something it has never seen and doesn't know about."

Dougen thought that was a pretty roundabout way of handling the situation. If they could do that much, they could surely keep it trapped in the dream forever.

"But you know, once it gets older, we actually need that child to keep the world safe. So we can't have it stuck in its own head forever."

"'Keeping the world safe' isn't something I expected to hear from the likes of you," he retorted.

"Oh, our little scuffles of the past were nothing more than siblings squabbling with each other. There are far more terrifying things squirming

about outside our world." The woman stood up, signaling the end of the conversation. "So, until the child is old enough to make better judgments on its own, we're taking care of it. I don't think you will now, but please try not to do anything stupid."

Even if she was lying, the concentration of evil within the shrine was something that Dougen couldn't stand up to regardless. The woman headed inside, turning around at the last second as if having just remembered something.

"Oh, by the way, this is probably the last time we'll ever meet, so if you'd like to confess your love for me, this is your last chance."

"No, thank you!" Dougen replied angrily.

"As I thought. Well, my job here will probably last for about ten more years, so if you're still alive, let's play then."

With that, she headed back inside. It was a while before Dougen was able to move again.

◇ ◇ ◇

"You damn fox! Why are you here?!" Dougen shouted.

They were in a conference room set up by the government of the Restricted Territory Disaster Management Task Force. Dougen had been informally invited as Japan's greatest practitioner of the mystical arts, although just about everything regarding this meeting was informal. The government didn't recognize the existence of the village, which was not shown on any maps in the first place, and neither did they admit to the existence of the transcendent being that had appeared from there and was even now killing people as it wandered around.

"I know that child better than anyone else, so I was asked to come as an advisor." The woman in the kimono was sitting on a chair, tapping away on the laptop set up in front of her. She looked entirely unchanged from when Dougen had seen her ten years earlier.

"Hello. My name is Masamichi Shidou," a man at the far end of the room called out to Dougen, urging him to take a seat. "I am currently in charge of this task force. You may think it presumptuous for someone like me to be in charge, but I assure you there is a reason for it. I am from a branch family of the village in question. Since time immemorial, we have been in charge of

handling things should the village ever be wiped out."

There was always a possibility of the village being destroyed. In order to address that risk, they had dispersed relevant personnel to various locations.

"I heard the village was wiped out. Was that thing responsible?" Dougen asked.

"We're all here, so let's start the briefing. To answer Mr. Dougen's question first, he was not the cause of the village's destruction." Shidou started typing on the keyboard in front of him. As he did, an image appeared on the monitor in front of them. It showed a number of people lying on the floor of a traditional Japanese-style room. The straw mats were soaked in blood, and each of the victims had expressions of suffering on their faces.

"They were all killed with swords. This creature being set free was part of someone's plan."

"Okay, but I thought it was a monster of inconceivable evil and power. Can you even make a plan for dealing with such a thing?"

At this point, the cause of the incident hardly mattered. The top priority was to find a way of neutralizing the threat that even the combined supernatural forces of the world couldn't defeat.

"Of course. We haven't been keeping up our ancient traditions for nothing," Shidou answered, full of pride.

"No matter what you say, I can't imagine it going well," the woman muttered.

Dougen couldn't help but agree.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Why is it that you are only telling me these tiny fragments of information every time I come up to make my reports?" Asaka Takatou asked indignantly as she sat in the meeting room on the ground floor of the Institute.

"There is an awful lot of sensitive information involved, so I'm not sure divulging it all at once would be wise."

They were chatting after Asaka had delivered her latest report. She had asked to learn more about Yogiri's past, but no matter how many times she inquired, she was never given what she was actually looking for.

"We are concerned that if you learn everything, you may lose your motivation, so we feel it's best to proceed slowly and carefully."

“Well, that’s fine, I guess. You will tell me eventually, though, right?”

“Who knows? This is classified information.”

“Hey!”

“Even if I really wanted to tell you, I’d need permission from my superiors. Speaking of which, I seem to remember being yours.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Asaka had grown quite lax in her attitude towards Shiraishi, but recognized that she was overstepping her position. “Actually, an awful lot of your superiors have passed away now, haven’t they? Did you not get promoted or anything?”

“No, unfortunately not. They only ever shuffle high-ranking officials around in those top positions.”

“Is that how it’s done?”

Since their conversation seemed to be over, Asaka stood up. Leaving the meeting room, she headed for the elevator. It wasn’t exactly a short trip to the underground village—it required taking numerous elevators and traversing long hallways.

“I really can’t get used to this,” she muttered as she stepped into the dark hallway. As far as she could see, the ceiling, floors, and walls were all covered with black letters. “I won’t get bad karma for stepping on sutras like this, will I?”

According to Shiraishi’s explanation, the words were Buddhist sutras, used as a “countermeasure.”

“He never did explain what they were being used for, did he? Seems pretty unscientific to me.” Of course, in this place, the line between scientific and unscientific was rather blurred in general.

After walking for a while, she ended up in a hallway covered in paper talismans. They weren’t pasted on the floor, but the cryptic, unintelligible letters written all over them still gave off an unnerving air.

“It looks like they’re moving but...that’s just my imagination, right?”

If they’d been fluttering in the breeze, it would have been perfectly normal. It was believable that the light wind caused by Asaka walking past was enough to make them tremble. But it wasn’t the paper itself that was moving; it was the words written on the talismans. When she looked back at a talisman, she could have sworn that the writing on it had changed.

“Just my imagination. It’s just my imagination... Wait, they’re falling off!”

Two of the talismans fluttered down to the floor. Looking at the now exposed piece of wall, she could feel someone watching her back. It was just a plain, gray wall, but she clearly felt like someone was observing her from within.

"There is definitely something wrong with this place!"

Asaka began to run.

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After returning from delivering her report, Asaka made it back to the mansion around noon, just as she had promised Yogiri.

"I wonder if there's a way back that doesn't pass through that hallway," she muttered as she stepped into the garden.

Yogiri was playing there with his dog, Nikori, a Shetland Sheepdog.

"Welcome back, Asaka!" Seeing her return, Yogiri and the dog ran up to greet her.

"Thanks. I'm going to make some food, so go ahead and wash your hands."

"Okay."

The boy walked over to the hand pump in the corner of the garden. They had running water inside, but Yogiri had taken a liking to pumping the water himself.

"Why are you here?" Asaka asked, turning to a woman who was sitting on the porch.

"Because I was bored?"

"They let you out just because you're bored? Seems like the security around here needs some work."

In addition to Yogiri, the Institute housed a number of dangerous individuals. Asaka didn't know all the details, but they seemed to be other people with supernatural powers.

"Hey, I'm the most beautiful person in the world, right?" their visitor said, puffing up with pride. True to her words, even the boring gray clothes that she'd been provided with did little to dull her attractiveness.

"And how does that relate to anything?"

"I'm so beautiful that people do whatever I ask. They even open the electronic locks for me."

“Sounds ridiculous. Doesn’t that mean you could escape whenever you wanted?”

“They normally keep me drugged, but ever since they slipped up a single time, I’ve basically been able to do whatever I want.”

“This place is terrifying. Your name is Estelle, right?”

It likely wasn’t her real name, although it was hard to say whether she was actually Japanese. She was fluent enough in the language and acted the part, but from her face alone it was difficult to guess where she was from. Perhaps when one was that beautiful, specific racial characteristics began to fade away.

“That’s just the code name they gave me here, but it works.”

“I know you said you were bored, but why come here, of all places?”

“Well, I figured if I tried to actually escape, they’d send someone after me. But if I came down here, they’d leave me alone.”

She was probably right. It was unlikely they’d send anyone after her if she went to where Yogiri was. The Institute was far too afraid of provoking him.

“And Yogiri is pretty cute too.”

“Yeah, please don’t get too close to him. He doesn’t need any bad influences.”

Estelle was the kind of woman who was likely to awaken sexual feelings in someone just by being present. She was the exact sort of person Asaka would never want around a child.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. Yogiri has already decided that my beauty is a sort of attack against him.”

So, while in front of Yogiri, she didn’t use her ability to appear as the most beautiful person in the world. *What kind of power is that anyway?* Asaka thought. The idea of beauty being a superpower was flat-out confusing to her.

“Then again, he might become a bit more interested once he’s around middle school age.”

“Can you not lick your lips when you say that?!” Even such blatantly wicked behavior had a bewitching quality coming from her. “Well, whatever. Do you feel like eating with us?”

“Sure.”

When Yogiri returned, they made their way from the porch into the living room. Asaka went straight to the kitchen and started preparing some cold

noodles. Yogiri helped with setting the table, and the three of them were ready to eat in no time.

"Man, I love this stuff." Yogiri seemed genuinely happy, but Asaka had mixed feelings. The meal was pretty minimal work, and she felt like she was slacking off by making it.

"It's so simple to make that you end up cooking a lot, but you get tired of it quickly, don't you?" she commented.

"That's true," Estelle replied. "When summer comes, we eat almost nothing else. Oh, but this is the first time I've had it in a while, so I'm happy to eat it."

"So, you are Japanese after all."

"Yes, Japanese through and through. But this facility is in Japan, so one would expect them to be using Japanese people, right?"

"What do they normally give you to eat?"

"Generally just a nutritional supplement from a tube."

"That's a lot worse than I thought!"

"Well, we're normally drugged, so I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"Doesn't that make it even worse?"

The fact that they didn't treat their test subjects as humans only confirmed her suspicions that this was an evil research laboratory.

"Well, I kind of understand why they don't let people like me roam free, so it's hard to complain."

"Are there a lot of people like you in here?"

"I think so. I don't know much about the others."

"I guess it would be a problem if they escaped." The main point of this facility was to keep Yogiri isolated, but an awful lot of people had managed to come in from the outside lately.

"Hey, do you hear something?" Estelle asked.

Now that she'd mentioned it, Asaka could hear something like a small bell being struck from the hallway.

"What is that?" Putting her food aside, she stepped out into the hallway. It was the phone. "Wait, since when has this actually been connected to anything?"

There had always been an old landline set up in the mansion, but she'd been told it couldn't contact the surface, so she had figured it was purely

decorative.

She decided to answer it. “Hello?”

A burst of white noise greeted her. It sounded like there was someone talking on the other end, but she couldn’t understand a word of it through the static. It seemed like they were speaking from a huge distance away.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Ah, I finally managed to get connected.” It was a deep, murmuring voice. It sounded like a man.

“Hello? Is that Shiraishi?”

“Yes. It’s me. Shiraishi.”

At his response, she decided it indeed sounded like him. “Since when can you call us?!”

“It’s an emergency. Please come to the surface immediately.” With those words, he abruptly hung up.

“Huh? What’s going on?” Asaka asked in confusion. “They said we couldn’t contact anyone upstairs from here, but I guess in emergencies, they can contact us?” It seemed possible, but she felt like they should have informed her of it beforehand. “I guess we should go see what’s up.”

She wasn’t too pleased about being called back to the surface after having only gotten back, though.

After telling Yogiri to clear up lunch, Asaka headed back upstairs.

In the end, it was a matter of coincidence. It wasn’t because Asaka was underground nor did it have anything to do with her connection to Yogiri. It could have appeared anywhere, and its prey could have been anyone. The traps of darkness existed all around.

To put it in simpler terms, Asaka had terrible luck.

◇ ◇ ◇

Asaka continued down the endless, lifeless hallway. She had taken her usual route to the surface, but no matter how far she walked, the elevator didn’t come into view.

It’s not like there are any turns for me to have missed.

She stopped and turned back. The hallway behind her seemed to continue on forever with no end in sight.

“Huh? Wait a second!”

She knew for a fact that there were no branching paths along the way to the elevator, but neither was the hallway straight. There were plenty of sections where the corridor turned and curved, but she couldn't see anything like that now.

Asaka struggled to figure out what she should do. Such a bewildering situation was beyond her. Checking her shoulder bag, she found only a water bottle and some writing instruments inside.

"What am I supposed to do?"

She really only had three options: keep going, head back, or wait where she was.

If I wait here, someone might come. But the phone call that had started all of this was too bizarre. If it hadn't actually been Shiraishi on the line, no matter how long she waited, no one would come for her. So she decided to head back. She hadn't even made it to the first elevator yet, so returning home seemed like the best choice. *Assuming I even can make it back.*

She walked in a straight line, but with the end nowhere in sight, she didn't seem to be making any progress. She walked and walked, but not even one of the normal turns in the hallway appeared.

At some point, the walls began to look old and crumbled. Rusted iron bars became visible, jutting out from the concrete. The lights in the ceiling grew gradually weaker until they barely illuminated the hallway at all. The scent of rusted metal began to fill the air as something like traces of old blood appeared on the floor and walls. This was obviously not the direction she had come from.

"I seem to remember seeing something like this in a game before..."

Asaka couldn't stop now. If she didn't keep walking, she felt like she'd get sucked into the changing world and rot away herself. That thought compelled her to continue moving.

"You've got to be kidding."

Next it began to grow foggy. A white mist clouded her vision, the uncomfortably warm and muggy atmosphere clinging to her skin. Each mechanical step forward seemed to sink into the ground with a squelch, giving off the sound of a faint cry every time, but she pushed it all from her mind and forced herself to keep going.

Faint voices began to whisper directly into her ear. She didn't recognize the language, but the words felt like some sort of spell. Unable to handle it,

she turned to see where they were coming from, but no one was there. Then she heard a sound from nowhere in particular, like someone trying to stifle a laugh. As soon as she thought that she had reached her limit, that she couldn't take another second of this, a bright, rectangular light came into view.

The exit.

Asaka ran. Passing through the hole, she left the hallway behind. The mist suddenly cleared, and the scenery that appeared in front of her brought her to her knees.

This was hell. She couldn't think of any other way to describe such a place.

The ground was a rusty metal grate that seemed like it might collapse at any moment. Below it was a dark sea of what looked like blood, with white bones sticking out from it. From the sea of blood rose a number of black metal towers, stretching up through the metal grating and into the sky. In that crimson sky was a similarly crimson moon, filling the world with blood-red light.

She turned back, and just as she had expected, the hallway was nowhere to be seen. Even the metal floor just stopped, nothing but that red sea continuing into the distance. Something like boats were floating there, drawing closer. Wriggling.

As they approached, she realized they weren't boats at all but some sort of insect. Covered in a glittering black exoskeleton, their multi-jointed legs carried them in chaotic paths across the red surface.

As she watched the surreal sight of the bugs crawling towards her, countless tentacles burst out from the blood. They grabbed the edge of the metal flooring she was on, using it to pull themselves up.

Asaka fell onto her backside and skittered away from the edge. They were grotesque. They looked like enormous fish with human faces, hands, and feet, and countless tentacles.

The monsters began climbing up onto the metal grating one after another. And then like a mountain emerging from the sea, something else split the surface. It was equally revolting, like a creature that someone had slapped together haphazardly. It was a lump of flesh that seemed to be made out of centipedes, floating far above her in the sky.

The moment she saw that, Asaka truly understood that there was nothing she could do. These things existed on an entirely different level. She was just

a sacrifice, an offering to some twisted god. And something in her mind snapped.

"Who the hell would be scared of you?!"

If these monsters had really wanted to, they could have killed a lone human without the slightest effort. But they didn't. Instead, it seemed like they were trying to scare her, to enjoy her terror. And that made her angry.

Tears began to blur her vision, and her teeth were chattering, but even so she shouted back at them. She refused to give these creatures satisfaction. Of course, it was nothing more than a bluff, and it wouldn't even buy her time. She had a better chance of surviving simply by running in fear. But she didn't want to give in to this completely irrational situation.

"Asaka, it's almost dinnertime."

The atmosphere suddenly changed. It was hard to say how much intelligence the nightmares before her possessed, but they seemed to be equally confused.

"Yogiri?!"

At some point, the boy had appeared beside her. As she wondered how on earth he had gotten there, she noticed a hole in the air behind him. She didn't know why it was there, but she could see their underground village bathed in the light of the sunset beyond it.

"How did you know I was here?!"

"You didn't come back, so I went to ask where you were. They told me the cameras weren't working in one spot."

"And you figured it out just from that?"

"Yeah. I knew if you weren't there, you were probably here."

This was some sort of other world, so in theory, if there was a sort of wall separating their two worlds, Yogiri could kill part of it to open up a hole. That may have been what was going on, but Asaka didn't understand the logic behind it.

"Are you crying, Asaka?"

"What? No, umm..." She immediately grew embarrassed, wiping away her tears.

As if her actions were a signal, the confused monsters began to move again. They must have given up on trying to scare her. The clear killing intent now coming from them made Asaka freeze. They were done playing. They were interested in nothing less than slaughter now.

“Stop bullying her!”

But with Yogiri’s words, everything stopped. The bizarre fish creatures fell over, and the bugs skittering across the surface of the blood instantly sank. The moon hanging in the sky fell, and the centipede-like monstrosity crumbled. The entire world began to shake. Asaka felt like an invisible layer of evil that had been cloaking the world had been removed.

“I’m hungry. Let’s go.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Rising unsteadily to her feet, she took Yogiri’s hand. They stepped through the hole in the world and were suddenly back in the village. She had left while they were eating lunch, but it was evening now. She hadn’t realized that she had been wandering around for that long, but it was a fair assumption that her perception of time within that bizarre space had been warped.

“I’ve experienced all sorts of weird things since coming here, but that really takes the cake...” If Yogiri had been any later, she might have gone insane. “Is there anything special you want for dinner, Yogiri?”

“I want hamburger steak.”

“Well, that might take a long time to make. How about some sort of Korean barbecue?”

“That sounds good too.”

What the hell was that place? Glancing back at the hole they had emerged from, she could still see into that other world. It was quite possible that the hole would remain open forever. If Yogiri hadn’t come to save her, she would most certainly have died there. She’d had no way of saving herself.

Although Asaka was absolutely thankful for his intervention, she felt that his abilities were terrifying. If he could go so far as to punch holes in the world, just how far did his powers go? If he were to turn that power against humanity, they would be helpless against him.

Well, if that happens, I’m sure it’ll be humanity’s fault anyway.

Asaka decided to leave it at that.

There was no particular reason for this to have happened to Asaka. Once again, she just had terrible luck. And whatever had attacked her had even worse luck. The prey it had set its sights on just happened to be someone close to Yogiri. The monsters writhing just outside her own world hadn’t had a clue what they were up against.

Afterword

At last, volume 5! Thank you very much for coming with me this far. Oh, I guess that makes it sound like the series is over, but as long as it doesn't get canceled, I still want it to continue, so please stick around.

So, the afterword. I need to write a certain amount this time, but I have to wonder if anyone actually looks forward to reading these. I understand it serves a purpose for adjusting the final number of pages of the volume as well, but I sometimes can't help but wonder who I'm writing these for. Well, this time I have something to announce, so I should be able to get that page count up.

The first topic is, this series is getting a manga adaptation! So you will soon be able to enjoy the story in an easy-to-read comic format! The title will be a little different from the novel version: *My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! —AΩ—*

Yes, we added "AΩ" to the end.

Hanamaru Nanto will be in charge of the manga. I wondered how she'd manage to make such a weird story into a comic, but her skillful construction has created an impressive piece of work, so please give it a read.

You might feel unsure about reading the manga of a story you already know, but how many of you really remember what happened in volume 1? This might be a great chance to get a refreshing new take on it, don't you think? Also, everything is much easier to understand in manga format, so I think it's more fun to read! And although not every character that appeared in the novel shows up in the illustrations, that obviously won't be the case for the manga, so if you were ever curious about how someone looks, I highly recommend you check it out.

The comic is currently doing very well at Earth Star Comics (http://comic-earthstar.jp/detail/sokushicheat/). New chapters are released at the end of each month, so please drop by.

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Also, this book and the first volume of the manga will go on sale together! So if you're reading this afterword at the bookstore, please go over to the manga section and find it!

The manga has a bonus short story in it as well, so please look forward to that. It is a continuation of the scene from volume 1 where Mokomoko first appeared to Tomochika alone in her hotel room. Mokomoko said she would initiate Tomochika into the true Dannoura style, and Tomochika appeared very tired the next morning, remember? Basically, it's an account of what happened that night. It doesn't directly relate to the main story, so there won't be any problems if you don't read it, but if you're curious about what the Dannoura School of Archery is like, then please do. I thought that maybe if we added a side story to the end of the manga, people who read the books will go read that too...

Now that I've announced the manga, and since I still have some space left, I'd like to advertise my pixiv FANBOX. Here is the address:

https://www.pixiv.net/fanbox/creator/1559348

This is a service for people to support creators. There's currently no benefit to supporting me other than "Maybe he'll be really happy and it will motivate him to work hard!" But I'd like to humbly ask for your support anyway. I may start putting advance copies of the chapters I write up there, locked behind the paid plans, but I haven't totally decided yet. I feel like if I try to promise anything at this point, it might just be too much stress.

"Wait, weren't you doing that VALU thing?" some of you may be asking. But, uhh, that didn't really get all that popular. I haven't given up on it, though.

I feel like I should write a bit more. I can probably stop with the character recruitment thing. I haven't really been getting that many submissions.

So let's talk about the difference between this novel and the web version. This time, there were a lot of improvements that went into writing it. There wasn't all that much text for the web version, and the timeline was pretty hard to understand, so I almost rewrote the whole thing. I feel like if you were unsatisfied with the web version, the print version might be more enjoyable. On the other hand, there were so many changes that the web version looks more like a summary now... But I guess for you guys who

bought the print version, that's not a problem at all! From volume 5 onward it will feel like a whole new story, so please look forward to it.

Next, my thanks.

To my supervisor. I was worried that, since this book would be published in August, it would interfere with your Obon holiday. Thank you very much for your work.

To the illustrator, Chisato Naruse. Thank you for always providing such fantastic illustrations. Also thank you for your countdown illustrations that you post on Twitter. The countdown for volume 4 was an introduction of what she thought were the highlights of the series. Thank you as always.

So, volume 6. I haven't heard anything about it being canceled (sorry for bringing it up every time), so I expect it will be coming out, but as always it all depends on sales, so I humbly ask again for your support. If you have found the story interesting, please continue reading! I would also be very grateful if you would pick up the manga version as well!

See you next time!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
藤孝剛志

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Hello, this is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse. When asked what the best part of doing the illustrations for a novel like this is, I would say it's being able to read the novel before anyone else, but now there is a new side benefit that I have discovered. And that is to see the characters whose designs I was in charge of move around inside the book itself! That's right, I'm talking about a comic!

Even though I've read the story many times over while doing illustrations, and thought I knew it quite well, I still found the manga fun to read. It is amazing! Ms. Nanto's version of Yogiri is so cool and awesome!

I seriously recommend that you check out the comic!

Chisato Naruse

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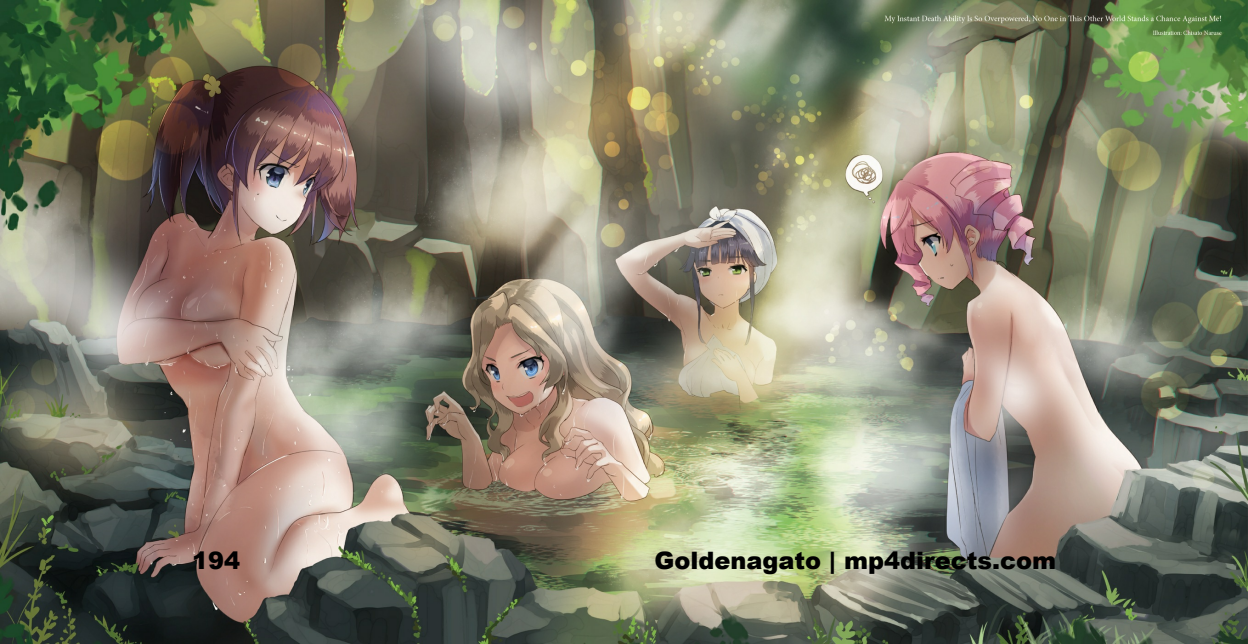

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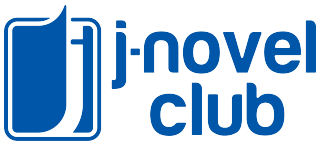

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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 5
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Nathan Macklem
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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